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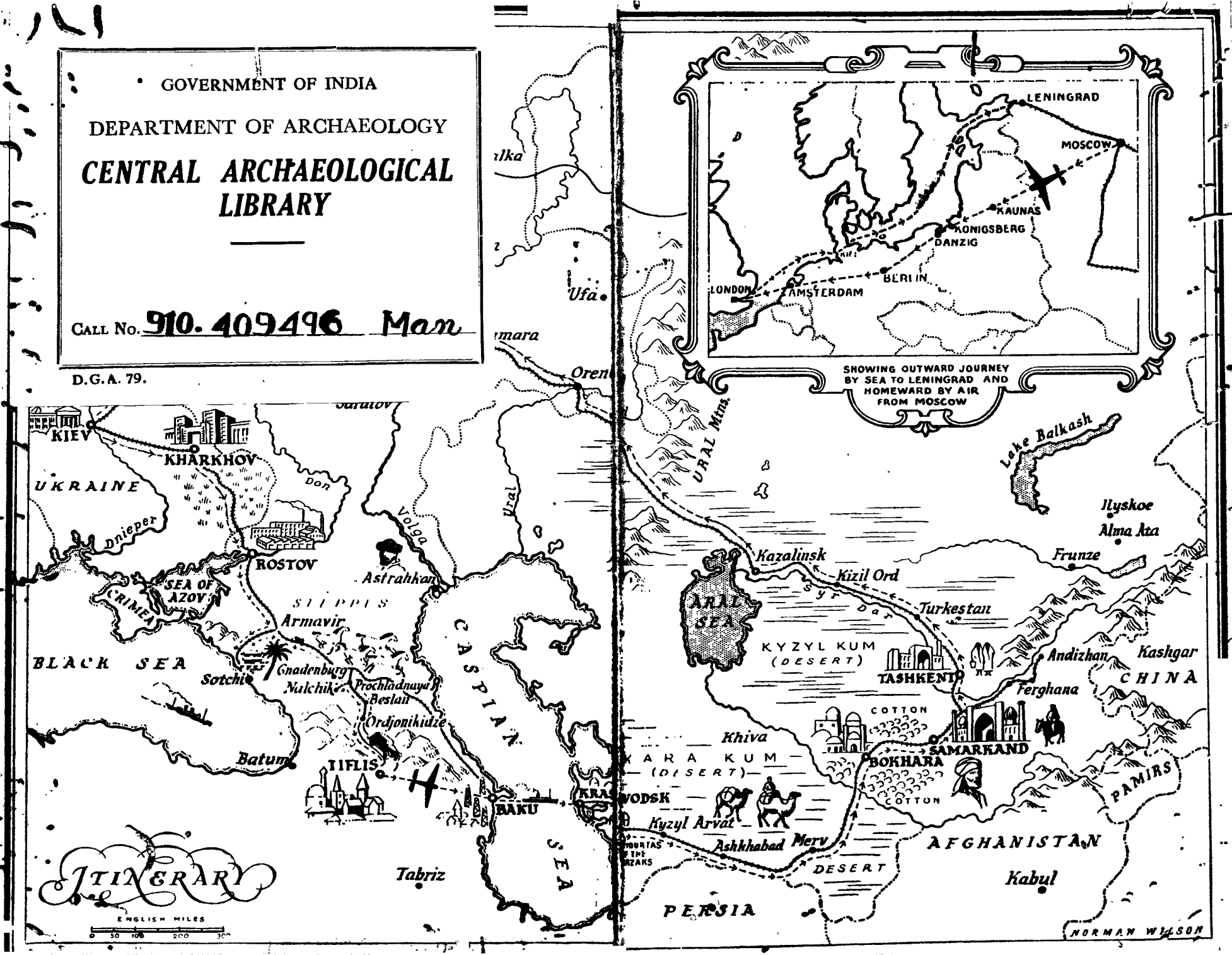

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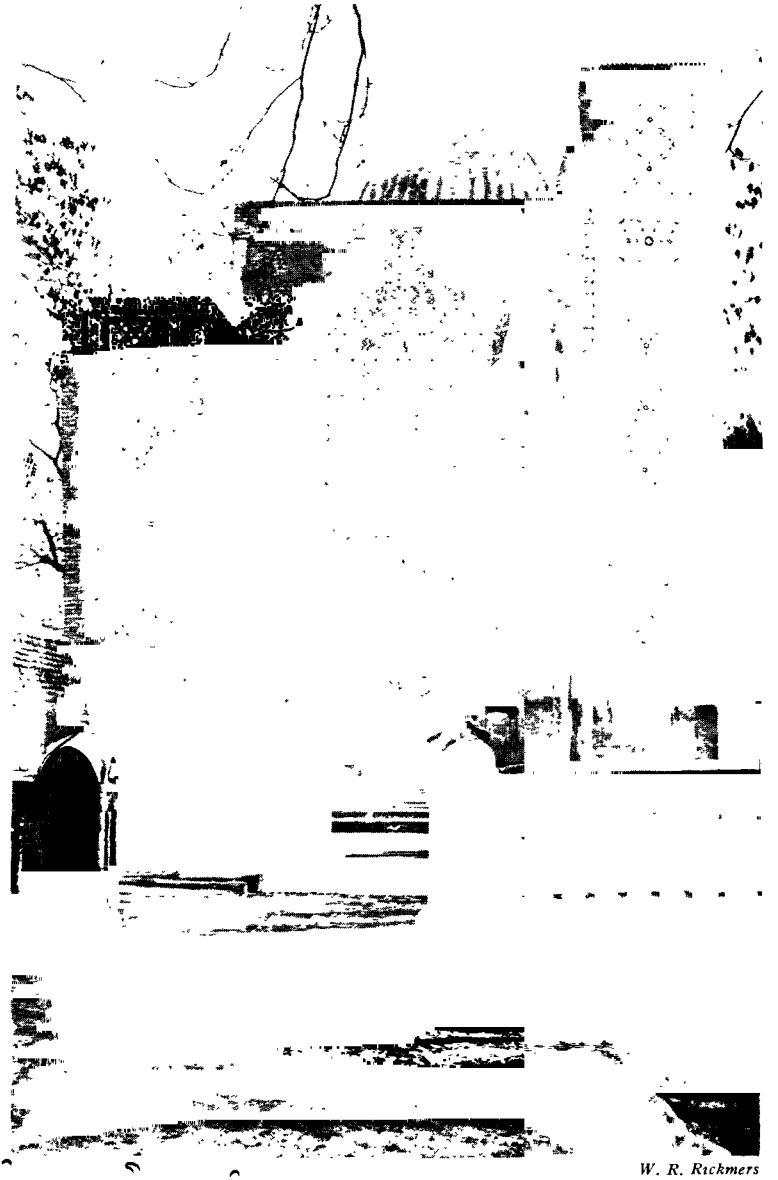

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SAMARKAND: ENTRANCE TO THE MOSQUE OF GUR-EMIR, THE TOMB OF TAMERLANE

SOUTH TO SAMARKAND

ETHEL MANNIN

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'For lust of knowing what should not be known,
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TO

JAMES WHITTAKER

WHOSE IDEA THE BOOK WAS

Oxford Book # 9/11 - 23-3-35

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE comments and opinions expressed in the book are those of the author; Miss Donia Nachshen, the artist who accompanied the author on the journey, is not to be associated with them.

Although it was originally intended that Miss Nachshen should illustrate this book, after reading the manuscript she felt that she could not co-operate in a book whose attitude to, and criticisms of, the U.S.S.R. she regards as in many instances mistaken and misleading, despite the author's claim of impartiality; the sketches made on the journey have not, therefore, been included. This is all the more unfortunate as of the numerous photographs taken by Miss Nachshen on the journey and left behind by the author to be developed in Moscow—since it is forbidden to bring undeveloped films out of the country—only five prints resulted, and none of them worth inclusion in the book.

In fairness to Miss Nachshen it should be said that she offered to allow her drawings to be reproduced in the book if the author would permit her to add two or three chapters at the end expressing her own—Communist—point of view. To this the author, not herself a Communist, and not wishing the book to be in any way propagandist, could not agree. The book is to be regarded

primarily as a travel book, with no political axe to grind for or against the U.S.S.R. Which attitude is clearly defined in the first chapter.

There are so many different ways of spelling the Eastern words and names which occur in the second half of the book that the author has in each case taken what seemed the simplest with regard to the Anglicized pronunciation. Thus 'Shakh-Zinda' has seemed preferable to 'Shah Zindeh' or 'Shad-i-Zindah', 'Tadjik' to 'Tadzhik', and so forth.

E. M.

PART I

MOSCOW TO THE CASPIAN SEA

I

'THE GOLDEN JOURNEY'

OF the writing of books about modern Russia there is no end, and for this reason these few introductory remarks concerning this book seem to be indicated as being advisable if not absolutely necessary, since this book is, I hope, not just 'one more book about Russia'. If it is, then it fails of its intent, for I wanted very much that it should be first and last a *travel* book, the story of a pilgrimage—perhaps the most romantic pilgrimage available to the traveller, the Golden Journey to Samarkand. Though available is perhaps the wrong word, for in order to visit Asiatic Russia lawfully you must be possessed of a permit from the Foreign Office of the U.S.S.R. and such permits are not readily granted to foreigners, but only in very exceptional circumstances, and to English people not at all.[1] Which rule was firmly adhered to,

[1] Walter Duranty, Moscow correspondent of the *New York Times*, and author of *I write as I Please* (Hamish Hamilton, 1935), is an Englishman, and was in Samarkand in 1930, but he was one of an organised group of Press-men who went to report on the triumphal joining-up of two points of the Turk-Sib Railway. The story of how he and a few others had to 'bolt' from the party in order to see anything of ancient Samarkand is told in his book. Anna Louise Strong, who is on the staff of the *Moscow Daily News*, and is the author of *Red Star in Samarkand* (Williams & Norgate, 1930) secured a permit for Turkestan by getting herself invited to a women's conference in Tashkent. She is American, and I have heard her described as 'virtually a Soviet citizen'. Ella Maillart, the Swiss author of *Turkestan Solo* (Putnam's, 1934), told me that she did not succeed in getting a permit,

apparently, in the time of the Tsars, for the same reason as applies today—the proximity of the Afghanistan frontier. The area is naturally suspect as a happy hunting ground of British agents.

A few years ago there were organised tours to Samarkand, under the auspices of 'Intourist', the tourists living on the train and being taken on conducted tours to see the sights. *The Iron Road to Samarkand*,[1] by Margaret Craig-McKerrow, is the record of such a tour, and as a travel-diary makes interesting reading.

The tours are not now available, and in any case this was not my idea of a Golden Journey. I was determined to go to Samarkand unconducted, and I did. When I resolved this I did not know that permits were necessary, but having tried to secure permits and failed, instead of abandoning the dream Donia Nachshen and I went without them.

I believe passionately with that most courageous of travellers Ella Maillart that, in the words of Georges Duhamel, '*real strength, real courage, and the only genius in this huge ant-heap of ours lies in going where one wishes, when one wishes, and as rapidly as one wishes*'.

I have always believed in the driving-force of wanting a thing enough, and in my own experience it has always held. I have observed that the trouble with a great many people who complain that life does not yield them what they want is that they have no clear idea of what it is they want, and even when they have do not want it enough for there to be any driving-force behind the desire. They bring no passion to bear on their dreams. They sit back and grumble and wait for things to happen, and when they don't, grow bitter, or merely drearily discontented with their lot; it never occurs to them that the realisation of dreams has to be worked for, fought for, that it involves suffering, sacrifice, relentless determination, and all kinds of courage.

Determination is nine-tenths of the battle. Several times on

though she was fortunate in finally securing a document which permitted her to stay at various travellers' hostels in Turkestan. An Englishman, Ralph Fox, author of *People of the Steppes* (Constable, 1925), was sent to parts of Russian Turkestan in 1922 by a Russian Mission for famine relief to which he was attached, but did not go to Samarkand.

[1] De la More Press, 1932.

this Samarkand journey Donia would preface some remark or suggestion with, "If we get to Turkestan—" and always I would correct her—"*When* we get to Turkestan—" I would say, firmly.

A few years ago two other Englishwomen reached Samarkand without permits—and were duly expelled. Donia Nachshen and I were resolved to beat this, and we did so, for we crossed Russian Turkestan from Krasnovodsk on the Caspian Sea, across Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and through Kazakstan back to Moscow, without permits and without detection. It is easy enough to get into Turkestan without a permit, for there is no frontier to cross, but it is not so easy to avoid being turned out, because in all Russian hotels your 'papers' are asked for immediately on arrival, whether you are Russian or a foreigner, and are subject to police-inspection. Avoidance of expulsion, therefore, is only to be achieved by a careful and rigid avoidance of going anywhere where it may be necessary to show one's documents, which, of course, adds considerably to the difficulties and discomforts of the journey. How much you are prepared to put up with depends, naturally, on how much you want to get there. Donia and I were prepared to put up with a good deal.

How we 'managed' is part of the story of a journey which in spite of its glamorous objective was at times far from 'golden', though it started with a flourish of golden domes and golden leaves in Leningrad and Moscow, which flourish was even more lavishly repeated in Kiev, and followed an always interesting, though often exhausting, trail down through Kharkhov and Rostov to the Caucasus, took us to the Black Sea, and by way of Tiflis and Baku to the Caspian—which we crossed fourth-class, none other being available, though we had waited all day in a queue for tickets—and over steppes and deserts, through oil-fields and cotton-fields, and deposited us at last, dirty, dogged, and exhausted, amongst the incredible splendours of Tamerlane.

But though we covered 7000 miles, travelling unconducted throughout, this book will not serve, and is not intended to serve, as a Guide to Modern Russia. The Webbs' monumental work, and lesser works by other intelligent observers, English and American, are available for those who would acquaint

themselves of the latest developments of the latest Five-Year Plan.

I wanted very much in this book to write dispassionately about the U.S.S.R.; to keep it, as I began by saying, primarily a travel-book, leaving readers to draw their own conclusions from a record of observations, without any intrusion of political prejudice one way or the other on my part. There are plenty of passionately pro-Soviet books, and possibly even more 'anti', and both distort facts, or over-emphasise different sets of facts, to serve their own propagandist purpose. The rabid Communist who sees nothing but good in the U.S.S.R. and all its works does the U.S.S.R. and the Communist cause as much harm in the long run as the most savagely anti-Soviet Tory. The one strengthens the 'anti' prejudices of the sceptic by admitting of no criticism, and the other tends to see only the surface facts unrelated to what existed in the past and what is aimed at for the future, and both present a hopelessly distorted picture.

The only person who can give anything approximating to a 'true' picture of modern Russia is someone who doesn't give a dam' politically, one way or the other. Which is why Duranty's book is probably the best book on the U.S.S.R. which has yet been written, for he declares that he is not concerned with the right or wrong of the Bolshevik course—'Right and wrong are evasive terms at best,' he writes, 'and I have never felt that it was my problem—or that of any other reporter—to sit in moral judgment. What I want to know is whether a policy or a political line or a regime will work or not, and I refuse to let myself be side-tracked by moral issues or by abstract questions as to whether the said policy or line or regime would be suited to a different country and different circumstances.' After fourteen years in Russia he comes to the conclusion that the Bolshevik policy does work, and is 'profoundly convinced that the U.S.S.R. is only just beginning to exercise its tremendous potentialities.'

Whether I can claim to be as objective as Duranty I do not know, though I should like to be and have tried to be, for I start off with the political prejudice in favour of the abolition of the capitalist system of society and the establishment of a

workers' state, and this the U.S.S.R has achieved. On the other hand, I find myself politically opposed to the foreign policy of the U.S.S.R., and ethically—and I suppose politically too—opposed to the Communist attitude which permits of no criticism of existing conditions in the U.S.S.R. and which disposes of all criticism by the eternal reiteration of the assertion that Russia is still in a state of transition. Which is true, but to my mind not always satisfactory as an answer, particularly in regard to *tendencies*.

The trouble about offering any criticism of the U.S.S.R. is that it immediately provokes attack from the Communist Party, and is seized upon by all the enemies of Communism and twisted to anti-Soviet propaganda. Which is what happened in the case of an article I wrote in the *New Leader*, the organ of the Independent Labour Party, this year, under the title, *Russia—Whither?* in which I spoke warmly of the achievements I had observed throughout the Soviet Union in the course of my 7000-mile journey, but offered it as my opinion that certain social inequalities I had observed were an anachronism in a workers' state. These criticisms were immediately seized upon by the *Blackshirt*, the organ of the British Union of Fascists, and exploited, out of their context, as anti-Soviet propaganda. 'Ethel Mannin's Disillusion in Russia' they yelled, in headlines and on posters. I decided that the most effective reply to this disgraceful bit of Fascist editing would be to correct the misrepresentation in the columns of the official organ of the Communist Party of Great Britain, the *Daily Worker*. The editorial department expressed its pleasure at the suggestion, and on the 15th February, 1936, they made a special feature—complete with posters—of an article which I called 'Blackshirt Lies About Russia'. In this article I stated that I did not retract the criticisms I had offered in the *New Leader*, but pointed out how the Fascists had shamelessly taken my comments clean out of their context in order to serve their anti-Soviet propagandist purpose, and repeated even more emphatically than I had done in the *New Leader* my praise for the achievements and progress of the U.S.S.R. One of the editorial staff wrote me a personal note thanking me for the article and expressing the hope that it would be the first of many I would write for

them. I as cordially replied. Imagine my complete amazement and bewilderment the next morning, therefore, on finding in the *Daily Worker* a whole editorial devoted to an attack on my article which, they said, 'purported' to be a reply to the 'Blackshirt comments', and charging me with *naïveté* in not realising that my report of my visit to the Soviet Union was so much 'in line with current anti-Soviet propaganda that it was, for the *Blackshirt*, a chance too good to miss', and with 'the outlook of a petty-bourgeois "Socialist" of a hundred years ago', and unable to grasp the need for decisive transition measures towards a classless society.

I was also rebuked along similar lines in a broadcast from Moscow shortly after the *New Leader* article appeared. That the U.S.S.R. should be 'touchy' about criticism when it has so much anti-Soviet propaganda to contend with is understandable, but, as I pointed out in the *Daily Worker*—apparently to no purpose where the C.P.G.B. is concerned—it is time it had learned to distinguish between the malicious attacks of its enemies and the candours of its friends. To regard with misgiving what would seem to be certain tendencies in the regime is not to belittle the magnificent achievements of the U.S.S.R. That in the face of every kind of setback and hostility Russia had achieved tremendous things under the Bolshevik regime is undeniable, whatever one's politics. She has erected schools, hospitals, universities, where none were before; she has cut roads and canals through wildernesses; she has sown the steppes with maize, cotton, wheat; she has planted vineyards, built factories and railroads, abolished the tyranny of the church, made art available to the common people, eliminated private profit, and given the land and the means of production back to the people. It is not necessary to 'believe in' Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Communism, Bolshevism, in order to accept all this as true; the facts are self-evident. No less true and self-evident is the fact that life is still, for the mass of people both in town and country, very hard; and that many people continue to live under very bad conditions.

The confusion of thought over Russia arises from the fact that almost everything you read about it, both for and against, is true. The difficulty is to get the achievements and the short-

comings into perspective; which can only be done by a scrupulous regard for the conditions which obtained in the past and the objectives for which the U.S.S.R. is working.

The U.S.S.R.'s clinics, children's theatres, modern workers'-apartments, model factories, and all the other innovations to which the tourist's attention is so persistently and tediously directed, and about which the Communists so uncritically rave, do not add up to Utopia by any means. (Fascists and others concerned with anti-Soviet propaganda kindly do not take out of context. The concluding sentence of this paragraph is correlative.) On the other hand, the fact that in Tiflis, Stalin's home-town, you may see, as I have, families living in cellars, and that in spite of the blocks of modern flats in Baku—which photograph so well for pro-Soviet propaganda purposes—a great number of the oil-workers are still living on the oil-fields under the most appalling conditions, does not prove that for all practical purposes the revolution has been a failure.

It *may* prove that even in a workers' state there will always be a certain small percentage of poverty, a residue of people who will never prosper under any system; that you cannot, in fact, completely eliminate the Under-dog. I don't know. On the other hand it may prove nothing except that everything takes time, and that eighteen years is not long enough for the judging of results of so great a revolution as the overthrow of the capitalist system of society. You may feel that the net result does not justify the perpetration of as many horrors and as much bloodshed as went to the making of the Russian Revolution. Duranty is interesting on what he calls this 'age-old question'. He admits that he himself sees too many sides of a question to be sure which one of them is true, and is inclined to pity single-minded people as 'being somehow deficient in unbiased judgment', but points out that 'whether one approves of the Bolsheviks and their methods or not, the fact remains that they have applied, developed, and set going in a practical form the only form of complete national collectivism which the world has known since the Inca civilisation was destroyed by the Spaniards.'

My own view is that whether the end justifies the means still remains to be seen. That the U.S.S.R. is still in a state of

transition is undeniable. Stalin himself points out in recent speeches that out of the socialist order of a workers' state they have still to build Communism. If they succeed in establishing the completely classless society of the Marxist ideal, all for all and each for each, even if not in time for the present generation to benefit, but for the rising generation and their heirs, it is my view that the terrors of the civil war and the horrors of the famines that followed the peasant resistance to collectivisation, will have all been justified; the victims of civil war and famine will truly have died that future generations might inherit the earth forever. The ideal is magnificent; but there is such a thing as reaction, and the swing of the pendulum, and the inherent littleness of human nature. If Russia fails ultimately it will be the greatest tragedy that has happened to humanity since the failure of Jesus Christ to impose Christianity—and all that it stands for of a living socialism and selflessness—upon an innately selfish world, so that instead of getting the sweetening and enriching philosophy of Christ we get the repressive anti-life philosophy of Paul. I have always contended that Christianity, to all intents and purposes, died with Christ on the cross, and that what passes for it to-day is merely Paulianity, a kind of religious Fascism (though A. S. Neill[1] calls the Oxford Group Movement that).

It is easier to 'believe' in Russia at a distance. In the thick of it it is quite dangerously easy to lose faith and one's sense of proportion, particularly when coming from the capital of a capitalist country. In the interests of being 'unbiased', and not to be out-done in honesty by Duranty, I will confess at the outset that there were times on the long and exhausting journey which produced this book when even I, who believe the overthrow of the capitalist system to be desirable in every country, even if it does not yield the full measure of revolutionary dreams, felt that the end was not justifying the bitter means; times when I revolted against the everlasting 'jam tomorrow' of the 'transition' answer to every criticism and protest: times when I began to believe revolution itself to be futile, a waste of human energy and a tragic sacrifice of human life, in view of the unchangeability of human nature, with its

[1] In *Is Scotland Educated?* (Routledge, 1936).

ingrowing greed and selfishness and lust for power. It well may be that all struggles for a better world, under any banner, are futile. If that be true, then life itself is futile. What of that? Like Russia, it is undeniably exciting.

Many readers of this book will undoubtedly be moved to gloat: "Ah, you see, even a self-confessed revolutionary can be disappointed and depressed in Russia." It is true enough. Conclude what you like so long as you also take into the reckoning that it is equally true that there were many occasions on which I felt delighted and optimistic. Work it out mathematically, if you like, which state the U.S.S.R. most often induced in your self-confessed revolutionary—but it will prove nothing except that like most writers I have a volatile temperament.

I am not a Communist—though in this politically unawakened country any reformist Labour Party socialist is dubbed that nowadays—and this book is not that propagandist tract which V.O.K.S. (the Moscow end of the Society for Cultural Relations with the U.S.S.R.) frankly hoped I would write when they made Donia Nachshen and myself their guests in Moscow, the Ukraine, the Caucasus, and Georgia. (They threw in Armenia, too, but eaten out and in with the dream of getting to Samarkand I was too impatient—and by the time we reached the Caucasus too travel-weary—to add that to the itinerary.) But neither is it the 'disillusioned' treatise, in the Emma Goldman manner, which the Fascists and all the other capitalist enemies of the U.S.S.R. would like to read into such criticisms as I offer in its pages. Since like Duranty I write as I please, it is likely that this book will sometimes upset the Communists—for whom Stalin and those about him can do no wrong—and sometimes those who are anti-Soviet. The only people it will never upset are those who are interested in Russia as a field of travel. They will probably skip the outbreaks of thinking aloud which occur in its pages—which is a pity, in fairness to Russia, for almost everything you may observe there needs explanation. A knowledge of the aims of the U.S.S.R. is essential to an understanding of what is going on. The dialectic attitude becomes necessary. Russia today demands thought as well as visual observation, and thought provokes the offering of opinions.

The itinerary as planned for us by V.O.K.S. kept us very

rigidly on the Black Sea side of the Caucasus. We were not intended to go to Baku. Erivain, they gave us, and Batum. We went to neither. My dreams lay in the East. I was more determined to cross the Caspian Sea into Turkestan than I have ever been about anything in my life. It was an obsession. I was determined that, though I speak no Russian, if Donia would not venture with me across that forbidden sea I would go alone, and that nothing short of actual physical force should restrain me.

As we neared Baku I began to develop a phobia. I began to believe that because Donia always said: "*If* we get to Turkestan—" instead of "*When*—" that she intended to desert me, or in some way *sabotage* the attempt. I knew that she was not obsessed by the dream of Samarkand as I was, and that she worried about the possible consequences of travelling in Central Asia without permits, whereas I was not concerned with consequences so long as we got there. The difference in our attitudes is explained by the fact that she wanted to stay for some months in Moscow at the journey's end, whereas I did not care if I never set foot in Russia again. When she spoke, as she did at times, of the possibilities of flying back from Tiflis to Moscow, I was convinced that she had no intention of making a bid to cross the Caspian. To all such ponderings on her part I would reply icily, but with a heart thudding with anger and defiance: "I am not returning through the Caucasus. I am going through Turkestan."

"We don't know if we can get there——"

"Only a complete stoppage of all boats crossing the Caspian will anyhow keep *me* out!" I would assure her.

Then she would be silent, and in my overwrought state I would believe her to be plotting against me. . . .

It seems fantastic now that I could have so misjudged her as to have had this lack of trust in her, for it is to her everlasting credit that without being herself in the grip of this Samarkand fever, and in spite of her misgivings, she stood by me loyally, and though it is possible that, with even greater difficulty than we experienced together, I could have crossed the Caspian alone, I doubt very much whether I could have completed the rest of that exhausting journey to Samarkand

without her Russian, even had I courage enough to dispense with her moral support.

That we parted at Moscow airport affectionately seven weeks after we set out together for Leningrad from the London docks says much for our friendship. Particularly for Donia's tolerance and good nature, for I am well aware that I was no easy travelling companion at times. To begin with, no traveller ever set out on a journey with less desire to go than I set out on this pilgrimage to Samarkand. It was on the eve of the Abyssinian war, and it seemed crazy to be going off at a time when anything might happen in Europe. There were people who strongly urged me against it, saying that it was madness, that in such a crisis my place was at home, with those I loved; I was sick with the dread of going beyond the reach of news, as I knew I must if I set out. Any terrible thing might happen, I thought, and I never know. For weeks I could not bring myself to fix a date for the departure, and no sooner had I done so than I delayed it for a week, and finally only went because my pride demanded it. For months I had talked of this expedition; I should have not only been letting a friend down if I had not gone, but letting myself down. Then, having at last started out, I knew only two desires—to get to Samarkand, and to get back again. Pride rescued me from the folly of taking the short cut—that is from boarding a train at Moscow and going straight down to Samarkand by way of Tashkent, the route everyone who has ever gone to Samarkand has gone. Having committed myself to the adventure, my vanity insisted that we should not take the easy, obvious way. We would get to Samarkand as others had done, but it should be more of an achievement than a mere sitting in the train until we arrived. Failing to get permits we would go without them; we would go the long and difficult way across the Caspian, and we would not get caught. . . . Anyone, I told myself, if they knew enough Russian, or had a Russian-speaking friend in Moscow, could go and buy a ticket for Tashkent, from whence it is only a night-journey, which in Russia is a short journey, to Samarkand, and having arrived there go tamely to the hotel, hand over one's papers, and wait for the police to send one, ignominiously, back to Moscow.

My pride, plus Donia's Russian, plus an adequate supply of bootleg roubles—for there was then no means of getting roubles legally—plus the driving force of determination, brought off the coup. On the five-and-a-half days' journey from Tashkent back to Moscow I got ill as a result of exhaustion and bad food, and back in London, failing to get any better, finally went into hospital. Some months later, as I write this, the trouble still continues, but if everything has its price—well, I did what I set out to do, and on my table lie six-hundred-year-old treasures which money cannot buy—fragments of turquoise and ultramarine tiles picked up in the sand from amongst the ruins of Tamerlane's golden Samarkand.

II

SOVIET SHIP

AT the docks she is referred to as 'the Bolshy boat'. There are the inevitable jokes about her name—'No use trying to read it. Nothing for it but to take it to the chemist's and have it made up.' And the no less inevitable jokes about Keating's. The tourist season is over, so there are no Bloomsbury Communists in dirty flannels and high-necked sweaters—self-consciously 'Bohemian' to prove there is no taint of the bourgeoisie in them—to sing the Internationale as the ship moves out. Which is a relief. I had dreaded this ship. I had feared that its passengers might consist of the friends of the more tiresome breed of Communist—such as abound in Bloomsbury, Greenwich Village, Montparnasse—and the more earnest kind of tourist who would take one aside and ask what did one Really Think of Russia, and did one consider it Really Worked, and was it true that You Only Saw What They Wanted You to See. . . . I was some years ago invited to conduct a party of twenty-five people to Leningrad and Moscow in return for three weeks' expenses paid. Though I had not then been to the U.S.S.R. and very much wanted to do so when both time and money should be available at the same time, I declined this offer simply because I felt that these questions would be inevitable, and that by the time the twenty-fifth person had asked me I should have gone melancholy-mad.

But on this my first journey to Russia by sea—the previous

year I had gone by air[1]—the ship is blessedly empty. There are several English engineers who have been home from Moscow on holiday. There is an American cartoonist going out with his wife to a job. There is an English designer going out to a job in a textile factory some miles outside of Moscow. There is a young Negro going out to study music. There is a party of representatives from various travel agencies going over to see how 'Intourist' run things. There are a few Americans who are 'taking in' Leningrad and Moscow in the same easy manner that they have just 'taken in' London and the Shakespeare country, Paris, Rome, and the rest of it. But the tourist element is negligible; not much seeing-off is being done, and that unostentatiously.

The *Daily Worker*, and a selection of Communist booklets are for sale on the covered hatch of the ship, in charge of a Negro. An excellent supper is being served in the pleasant and airy dining salon. Flags of all nations decorate the tables.

A preliminary tour of the ship discovers the Red Corner in the crew's quarters. We examine it with interest, for we are not to know that before many weeks have passed the sight of one more red-draped picture of Lenin or Stalin is like to give us hysterics. . . . We decide that the Red Corner is Nothing Much. There are the usual framed photographs of dead and gone revolutionaries, and a small bronze statuette of Lenin. In the adjoining room members of the crew play a kind of billiards with flat discs like draughts which they push across the table with cues. There is a wall-newspaper, to the new edition of which I later contribute fine revolutionary sentiments which win the approval of the party-members amongst the officers and crew, and which Donia amusingly illustrates. A very loud-speaking gramophone playing Russian songs makes sleep impossible till midnight. There is a loud-speaking apparatus in each first-class cabin for those who want the music blared even more loudly into their ears.

Inescapable as the loud-speaker is the American accent, which I abominate equally. It pursues one everywhere, penetrates one's cabin, and follows one on deck. It accompanies

[1] See *Forever Wandering* (Jarrolds, 1936).

one's meals, one's attempts at reading in the most secluded corners of the ship, breaks through one's shipboard dozes. It rides above the sound of the sea and of the engines. And how offensive is the American Child. There is one aboard, a typically precocious brat, grown old out of its due time. No wonder America is the home of that monstrosity the child film-star. Donia and I develop a phobia concerning this child. Donia draws it, maliciously, standing in its chair, waving its spoon above its head, yelling its wants and its don't-wants. After a few days we grind our teeth when it comes into the room, and reach the pitch at which we honestly believe that if it were washed overboard we should laugh. It refuses all the food offered it. Its bewildered parents speak no Russian, and the stewards speak no English. The most unkind cut of all is that Donia is called upon to translate the brat's requirements to the stewards. She is very gracious about it. Quite early on I decide that Donia is too nice. Too polite. Later in Moscow when I am storming against Russian bureaucracy I heap scorn upon her for this. She tells me, mildly, that it is as well she has this gift of inveterate courtesy, to counter-balance my own irascibility.

I am dreading Moscow. People ask me how long we are to be there, and I tell them: "Only as long as it takes to get out of it." By which I mean as long as it takes to get permits for Turkestan. We have been warned, and are prepared for, exhausting delays, infuriating frustrations, but I know myself well enough to dread the effects of such thwartings of my will. An 'act of God' I can accept philosophically, but man-made frustrations, particularly of the bureaucratic kind, drive me crazy. My passion for personal liberty amounts almost to mania. I tell myself, endlessly, repeating it over like a lesson I must learn within a limited time, that in Moscow I must be patient, that no good purpose will be served by hurling myself angrily against bureaucracy, that those who have the gift of patience go farther and fare better. I dread, too, the exhausting tempo of the life there, the days spent rushing round and achieving nothing, the extraordinary amount of time even the simplest things take, the inability to get to bed any night before the small hours, the meal-times at fantastic hours, one's own

degeneration into complete disregard for time, the sleeplessness, the excitement, the living on one's nerves. . . .

I have, as it is, immense arrears of sleep to make up. I spend a good deal of the time sleeping, in the determination to get properly rested in preparation for Moscow, but there seems no end to the unslept sleep in me. Between bouts of sleeping it occurs to me that a ship's cabin might be a good place in which to work if one could escape the sound of voices outside. I do work a little. I re-write the last chapter of *The Pure Flame*, and keep some sort of diary. As always in ships, I find concentration difficult. Perhaps in bad weather, when everyone is confined to cabin, and there are no intruding voices, it is easier; but an American voice, particularly a female one, I tell myself bitterly, would penetrate anywhere.

I lie about in low chairs on sheltered parts of the deck and read at, rather than read, Ella Maillart's *Turkestan Solo*, Anna Louise Strong's *Red Star in Samarkand*, and *From Moscow to Samarkand* by an anonymous Russian author. I dream endlessly of Bokhara and the storks' nests crowning the minarets, of Samarkand the Golden. I tell myself that if we do not get there I shall be too humiliated to return to England. Such humiliation is unthinkable. I hear Donia telling people, when they ask where we are going, that we are going to the Caucasus. Something hardens and tightens in me. A kind of anger. I don't give a dam' for the Caucasus. *We are going to Samarkand.*

"Why don't you tell them we are going to Turkestan?" I ask her roughly.

She answers patiently: "We don't know that we will get there——"

"Nothing can stop us!"

"We may not get permits."

"Then we'll go without!"

She is silent.

"Those other two got there without permits," I insist.

"They were turned out."

"We won't be!" I am burning with defiance.

She inquires with maddening coolness: "How do you propose we should manage, then?"

"I don't know!" I could weep with a curious combination

of anger and helplessness. I don't know at all how we shall manage. I only know that the idea of not getting there is unthinkable. And They—the all-powerful They—shall not turn us out, shall not discover us. I don't know at all how it will be, I know only that it must be, shall be.

By an unspoken mutual consent we speak no more of Samarkand, and the days at sea pass over us amiably enough, filled with the busyness of doing nothing very much. One spends so much time at sea merely gossiping. It is astonishing the amount of time one can spend in this pleasant pastime. The ship's doctor likes to talk of Life and Love—spelt in majuscules, like that. Glancing through a copy of my *Common-sense and the Child*, which I am taking to Moscow in the forlorn hope of getting it published there—for it seems absurd that it should be translated into Danish, Swedish, and Dutch, and not yet into Russian, Russia being the very centre of modern child education and upbringing today—he asks if I believe in God. When I assure him No, he comments that that is good. In Russia, he says, God, King, Imperialism, Marriage, they are all *Kapoot*. Donia takes him away to make a sketch of him, to give him English lessons, and no doubt to continue the discussion on that perennially interesting subject, Love. It is the first of many such discussions. The Russians like to talk of love. Throughout our journey we are continually being asked four leading questions: Do we believe in God, Are we Communists, Is England going to make war on Russia, What are the conditions of the working-classes in England? (Except during that part of the journey when we assumed Belgian nationality, when we were asked what were the conditions of the working-classes in Belgium.) And eventually we are asked if we are married. And so by easy stages we arrive at the inevitable discussion of Love.

But it is pleasant to lie in a deck-chair without some obsequious steward fussing round one as in capitalist ships, tucking one up, kow-towing to one in expectation of a tip, bringing one cups of Bovril as they do in trans-Atlantic liners and pleasure-cruises. And it gives the more revolutionary minded of us a 'kick' to see the red flag flying at the ship's bows. When I express this sentiment an English lady and a pugnacious little Scotsman

want to know what is wrong with the British flag. I feel that it would be difficult to say what is right with it, but I dislike arguments. Except on paper, where you have the advantage of being able to state your most vehement and controversial ideas and convictions without having anyone tiresomely—and usually irritably—answering back. I content myself with writing for the wall-newspaper that those who are living in a revolutionised society cannot realise what it means to us who are working for a revolution to be going to a country where all that we are working for is a living reality. . . .

After which, with the pettiness of which one is all too easily capable aboard ship, I write in my diary that 'The Awful American Child grows daily worse. It is a Compleat Exhibitionist, shows off the whole time, and is all eyes to see what attention it is attracting. The doctor has been called upon to prescribe for it because it won't eat. Why don't they let the little horror starve?'

It is an extraordinarily 'matey' ship. The passengers, including the second and third class, have the entire run of the ship. They are not even forbidden that holy of holies on all other ships, the Bridge. We spend a good deal of time leaning about on the bridge, discussing Communism, and, of course, Love; staring through binoculars, having compasses and charts explained to us, and mildly philandering. As an illustration of the liberty, equality, and fraternity of the Soviet ship—one day on deck a random remark that I wished I had a footstool sent Donia in search of one for me. She secured it, eventually, from the second-mate. He blew a whistle to call a sailor—a whistle is always blown when anything is wanted, it seems—and when he had blown it three times and nothing had happened, he left the watch in charge of a subordinate and went himself in search of the stool. Similarly, when the clasp of Donia's handbag breaks, nothing will do but that the chief engineer himself must be called in to mend it.

When we decide to send a radio message on one occasion we cannot get hold of the radio-officer because he is attending a political meeting in the crew's quarters, and the radio-office is shut up. The crew—including stewards and stewardesses—all attend political study meetings. We glimpse them through port-

holes, sitting on benches, in rows, very solemn, like good schoolchildren. There is no uniform for the sailors. We chat to them and learn that a number of them study in the evenings, from a syllabus, to become captains. They are intelligent lads, and want to know about working-class conditions in England, how strong is the Communist Party, who is its leader, whether we are party members, and whether England is going to war with Russia. . . .

We try to organise a dance for passengers and crew, but run into bad weather before evening, and the crew is vastly amused at our suggestion that since dancing on deck is impossible they should come up into the salon. They will have nothing to do with so bourgeois an idea, it seems, so we have the dance without the crew, but the selection of dance-records is poor and limited, and we are thinking of retiring to bed when the second-mate brings a message inviting Donia Gregorevna, and Ethel Robertevna—for it is the pleasant Russian custom to compromise between formality and familiarity by the use of the patronymic—to a party in the captain's cabin.

Here we find the table set with a coffee-percolator, a large bowl of fruit, and a bowl of sweet biscuits. The ship's doctor is there, and a Russian passenger. We drink coffee and numerous vodkas. The conversation which begins flippantly turns to Russian writers in general and Chekhov in particular. Chekhov, it seems, is at a discount. He is charged with depicting humanity's sufferings without offering a solution. That is to say, he is a defeatist, which is counter-revolutionary. Gorki, now. . . . I want to make the point that surely art need not necessarily drag a burden of propaganda with it all the time, but it is difficult to make any point when one does not speak the language and must rely on translation of statement and counter-statement all the time. . . . It doesn't matter. There is curiously no feeling of being out of things because one does not speak the language —one does, of course, many, many times bitterly regret that one does not; but on an occasion like this the flow of reason and communion of soul is untrammelled by any barrier of language, and after a time one gets the drift of a language one does not know. Later I developed a technique which reminds me of a story I read a long time ago—it may have been by

Paul Morand—about a man on a train who listened to a long and dramatic story from the guard in a language of which he understood not one word, though of the story itself he missed no nuance, and was able to express his sympathy and interest to the entire satisfaction of the narrator, who left him on the completion of the story convinced that the listener had understood every word . . . a story I could not understand at the time, but which I now comprehend perfectly.

We turn in very late after the party. The engines break down again. They have been breaking down all day. We shall arrive a day late in Leningrad. It is the first of a series of exasperations.

In the morning the sea is oilily flat. Donia and the second-mate organise a conducted tour of the ship, Donia translating for the second-mate, whose English is inadequate. Some of the men from the second and third class ask intelligent questions. The Scotsman is facetious and tiresome. He and the Negro sit opposite each other at meal-times in a stony silence, each despising the other. Only it can obviously never occur to the Scotsman that anyone can despise him; certainly not a 'nigger'.

We have no news of Geneva, which, after talking and thinking about Sanctions for weeks before sailing is, in spite of our continual wondering and anxiety, a relief.

We enter the Kiel Canal under a grey sky after a rough second night at sea, and a choppy sea on waking, with cabin-trouble in the form of things sliding about in what is perhaps best described as a sickening fashion. . . . As we enter the first lock men come alongside selling eau-de-Cologne, chocolates, cigarettes. All the morning there have been ships passing, flying the Nazi flag. In the first lock there is a French ship, and an English ship, the *Baron Pentland*. All day there has been a feverish writing of postcards for posting at Kiel.

The country on the Danish side of the canal is brown and green, with red-roofed, neat-looking little houses, and farms set amidst trees, and a great melancholy holding everything.

We stand about on the deck whilst the dusk deepens and the lights come out along the tow-path. There is a great bridge like the Forth Bridge, and a landing-stage labelled Ostermoor. It is all grey and monotonous and sad. We were promised news of Geneva today, but none comes through. The ship's company

seems infected with a general melancholy. I could weep with a nameless sadness myself. Donia is vaguely homesick. The Negro confesses, with a far-away look in his mournful eyes, that he is lonely in the ship. A Russian is moved to confide to us that he is dissatisfied with his life, but has not the will to end it. He needs love, he declares. These Russians and their souls, what egotists they are ! We talk of love till the canal is swallowed up in inky blackness. Even then we linger watching the lights and the emergence of the stars.

We dance that night, and I discover that one of the English engineers is a friend of someone I knew in Paris. We are as delighted over the smallness of the world as though we had realised it for the first time.

On the morning of the fourth day at sea a thin blue line that is Gotland is visible. The sea is flat and grey, the colour of the sky. There is a porpoise leaping, and a few small brown birds are flying about the deck, exciting the Scotsman to the point of going in search of crumbs for them.

We should have had news of Geneva by now, but nothing, we are told, has come through on the wireless owing to the bad weather. (The day before we could get nothing because the radio is shut down by international law in the Kiel Canal.) For all we know, Europe may have gone up in a blaze of war.

The fifth day breaks cold and grey and blustering, with a choppy sea. In the afternoon the sky breaks, and the sea goes down somewhat and the ship rolls less. But she is, all things considered, a steady ship. One cannot justly complain of her. She carries a cargo of rubber, tea, coffee, tin. Some of the rubber she was due to carry was destroyed in the Wapping fire.

We pass Tallinn, the capital of Estonia. Viewed from the bridge through binoculars, it emerges as a grey huddle of towers and chimneys and wooded cliffs. There are spirals of smoke, and a lighthouse on a point. I tell myself that one of these days I must have a look at the cobbled streets of Tallinn. Before the war, Reval, as it was then called, was one of the chief sources of food supply for St. Petersburg, and one of Russia's most important outlets to the sea. Is it a case of fox and the sour grapes which today causes Russia to refer to Estonia contemptuously as ' the potato republic ' ? For Estonia resisted Russian

domination in 1919 and regained her independence, together with fifteen million gold roubles in 1920, in return for which Russia got free transit to Estonian ports. For all that, the Communist Party was not made illegal until 1923 and even so there was a minor Communist revolution the following year, directed by Reval transport workers supported by Red guards against the government, and backed, of course, by 'Moscow gold'. This was suppressed, all Communist organisations officially closed, 30,000 men were enrolled as civil guards, and the revolutionary movement was down for the count, as the workers' movement was in Austria under Dollfuss. Today, Estonia is politically respectable, and, like Russia itself, a member of the League of Nations, and Tallinn, like Moscow, is developing as a tourist centre.

A number of cargo boats laden with timber pass, outward bound from Leningrad, and dipping their red flags to us in salute.

The following day, in the damp, penetrating, positively English cold of a drizzling grey morning, very early, we put into Leningrad, twenty-four hours late.

III

LENINGRAD: CITY OF SHADOWS

ST. PETERSBURG was the luxurious capital of pre-revolutionary Russia; Leningrad is the grey centre of the industrial life of the U.S.S.R. As a lady from the ship remarked: "You must confess that Leningrad is the shabbiest city you were ever in!" Of course. She is shabbier even than Dublin. But then Russia is perhaps the shabbiest country in Europe—and the most exciting. I say perhaps because Ireland runs Russia a pretty close second in the matter of shabbiness, and without any of Russia's faded splendours. Leningrad is grey all right; as grey even in sunshine as London in the rain. And shabby all right, shabbier than any distressed area. . . . But at every turn, how beautiful it is!

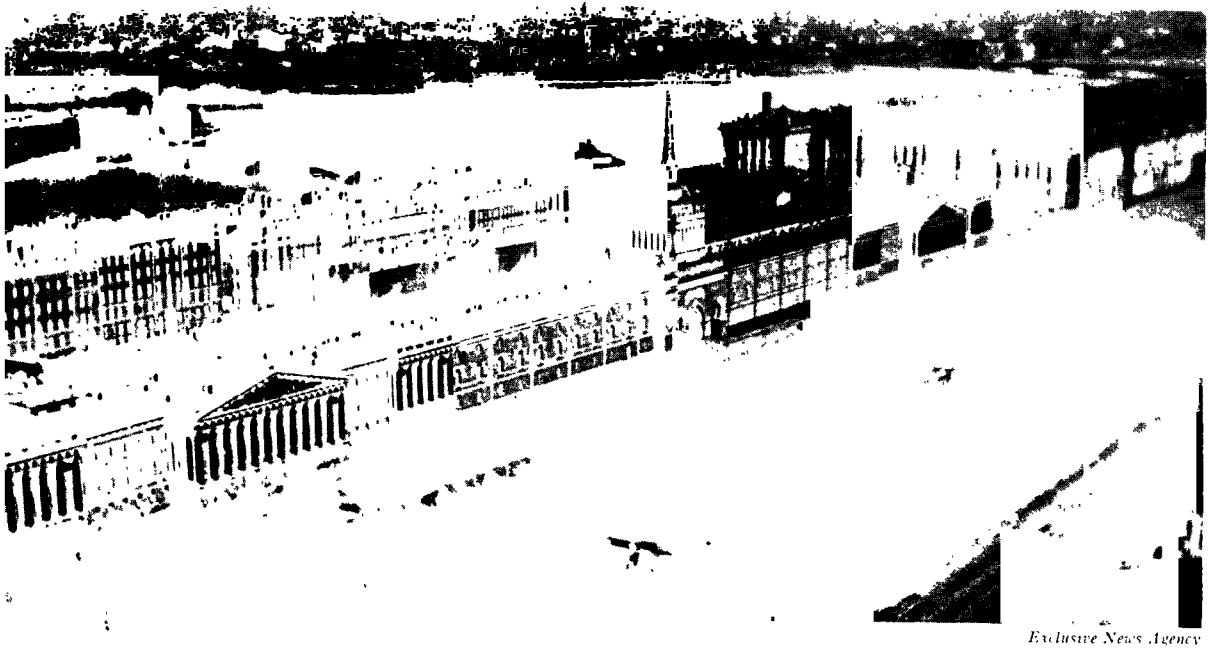
John Brown in *I Saw for Myself*[1] writes of the 'universal drabness of clothes' of crowds in the streets; like so many other writers out to disparage or to damn the U.S.S.R. he either saw only what he wanted to see, or deliberately suppresses half the truth in order to make an iconoclast's holiday. (He has also a tiresome habit of jumping to false conclusions out of his observations, and some of his statements are not altogether accurate, which, though not deliberate journalistic dishonesty is, to say the least of it, unpardonable journalistic carelessness.) The impression of the Leningrad streets is, true enough, of a drab level of poverty. The crowd is considerably less well-dressed than in Moscow. But so is a Manchester crowd less

[1] Selwyn and Blount (1935).

well-dressed than a London crowd, and for the same reason, which is that the one is an industrial centre, and provincial, and the other a capital, and cosmopolitan. Leningrad may be the shabbiest city in Europe, but it is easily one of the most beautiful. It is a grey wistful beauty, a beauty of shadows and half-tones, of stately faded yellow façades of one-time palaces, of the great open spaces of its vast squares, of decaying baroque, and eighteenth-century elegance grown down-at-heel. The city is built on piles in the marshes of the mouth of the Neva; so many lives were lost in its construction that some say it is built not on piles, but on human bones. It is an historic fact that the living conditions of the workers under Peter the Great, whose idea it was to build a city at the head of the Gulf of Finland, regardless of the unsuitability of such a place for a city, constituted a prime factor leading up to the 1917 revolution. Peter's own court abominated the idea of a city in the swamps, and prophesied that no good would come of it; but Peter was determined to have a city with easy access to Western Europe and with an outlet on to the Baltic . . . and consideration for the lives of the workers was never one of his strong points. Some of the remaining workers' hovels of the Tsarist regime contrast vividly with the charming Summer Palace Peter had built for himself facing on to the river, with wooded gardens reminiscent of the Luxembourg Gardens of Paris, and, like those gardens, with busts and statues—imported from Poland—distributed amongst the trees of the avenues and walks. Beside the river, also, stands the house of a man of true greatness, Pavlov, the physiologist.[1]

The sky-line of Leningrad is as famous as that of Manhattan, but as different as anything in architecture could be. It is a sky-line not of the sharp angles of modernity, but of the domes and spires and stately façades of a century in which elegance, not efficiency, was the predominating architectural ideal. One of the many bridges over the Neva is pointed out to the tourist as the one on which the hero of Dostoievski's novel *Crime and Punishment* stood looking at the beautiful sky-line of the city and seeing it as hideous, because behind the handsome façade formed by the stately and grand houses of the rich were the

[1] Since writing this Pavlov has died.



Exclusive News Agency

LENINGRAD, FROM THE ROOF OF ST. ISAAC'S CATHEDRAL

The spire in the foreground is the 'Arctic Star' of the Admiralty. The street in the bottom right-hand corner is the Nevski Prospect.

hovels of the workers, thus making of the city's grandeur an offence against society. Leaving social conscience out of it—and most tourists can all too easily—it is nevertheless a very fine study in half-tones which presents itself from this bridge, and for those with a social conscience there is the comforting reflection that the fine houses now serve as museums, picture-galleries, universities, government houses, and that luxury is now unknown in what was once Peter's ill-founded city.

Leningrad is broken up into numerous islands, and is said to have over five hundred bridges. There are times when the islands and bridges of the Neva are reminiscent of Paris and the Seine. The architecture of the eighteenth century predominates. There is one lovely yellow street by Rastrelli in which the buildings are all part of a gracious ensemble, in the manner of the Nash Regent Street—Rastrelli was, in fact, very much to St. Petersburg what Nash was to Regency London. The city is rich in baroque, and there is one beautiful early baroque church which, as the Russians say, still 'functions', its faded yellow set amidst silver birches. In the autumn, when the birches are cascades of gold, church and trees fuse in a golden symphony which is enchanting.

In striking contrast with this Western elegance is the Mohammedan mosque with its twin phallic towers of brilliant blue mosaic, and in deplorable taste is the imitation of St. Basil's, the now disused Church of the Blood, which instead of the romantic barbarism of the Moscow miracle of rare device, achieves merely a barbarous vulgarity. Outside this monstrosity, which is a grotesque and unpardonable caricature of what must surely be the most remarkable cathedral in the world, an old man, bare-headed, bearded, and in the smock and breeches of the peasant, bowed and crossed himself with fanatic fervour before each of the closed doors. Several people passed whilst he was thus engaged, but no one heeded him, or even gave him a second glance.

The gilded dome of the Admiralty, with the white columns supporting it and giving it its name, 'the Arctic star.', and the baroque dignity of the Smolny and the Winter Palace, are undoubtedly the outstanding architectural beauties of Leningrad,

but to my mind the charm of the city lies not so much in its architectural riches, in which it abounds, as in its river mistiness, and in the haunted melancholy of its vast squares. It is a city of shadows and of tragedy, of bitter memories of suffering, cruelties, oppression, selfishness; dark memories of passionate and terrible things, of self-sacrifice and mass murder.

Here is the house wherein that sinister figure Rasputin met his horrible death; here is the place in which a peaceful and unarmed deputation of workers, headed by priests, were without provocation shot down by the Tsar's soldiers; here is a garden that was once a swamp, made by workers in their spare time to commemorate the victims of the Revolution who fell 'with their banners in their hands'; flowers grow here now to the design of the hammer and sickle and the Soviet star. Here is a garden built in front of a palace as a protection against 'mass assembly'—all the Tsars appear to have had persecution mania and a fear of open spaces, not, be it acknowledged, without good cause.

It is a sad city; it has none of the feeling of exhilaration in the air which is part of the general atmosphere of Moscow—an atmosphere sharply reminiscent of the 'bracing' quality of the air and 'feel' of New York City. Leningrad, you feel, as the birthplace of the revolution, has seen too much, suffered too much, to have spirit enough left to go striding along in the triumphal march of progress as Moscow does. It marches, of course, but you do not breathe the air of brave new worlds as you do in Moscow.

Yet the citizens of Leningrad will have none of Moscow. Moscow, they say, has not the elegance and distinction of Leningrad; which is true. The strident twentieth century has none of the graciousness of the eighteenth, and Moscow is vigorously and uncompromisingly modern. In Moscow they call Leningrad provincial. In a sense it is. It has not the shops, the theatres, the cosmopolitan feel that Moscow has. The famous wide Nevski Prospect—now the 25th October Prospect—is as disappointing and tawdry as most famous streets; as the Prater of Vienna, for example, or the London Strand, though its shabbiness makes it more like the Prater than the Strand.

But Leningrad, generally, has escaped the vandalism which is so badly afflicting Moscow in the name of progress; soon the only golden domes and spires left in Moscow will be those of the Kremlin—though even there the double-headed golden eagles have recently been removed to give place to Soviet stars—and many a beautiful old church with blue onion-shaped domes powdered with golden stars has been sacrificed for the erection of yet another barrack-like block of workers' apartments, or a big stores, or a palace of commerce or industry. If it comes to a choice between beautiful old churches and accommodation for workers, it is just and reasonable, of course, that the old churches should go; my own protest is against the ruthlessness of Moscow demolition, and the ugliness of what takes the place of the destroyed beauty. Leningrad has escaped this insistent and aggressive modernisation, though it is not without its fine new streets and its seemingly inevitably barrack-like blocks of workers' flats. My memory of Moscow today is very different from the picture I carried away with me after my first visit a year before; in retrospect, now, it emerges as a streamline city on American lines, all scaffolding, construction, and white skyscraper buildings; Leningrad in retrospect is a purely sentimental memory of golden leaves and golden domes, and a grey mistiness on the river reminiscent of the Thames. There is an occasional echo of Stockholm, too, about Leningrad from the river, and if nobody has yet called it the Venice of the Baltic because of its canals and islands and faded palaces, no doubt somebody soon will discover it as such and label it accordingly.

In nearly every street we found dingy and peeling façades being repaired—in Moscow the building would not be repaired; it would be torn down and a brand new one rushed up in its place. The Leningrad trams are if possible shabbier than the Moscow ones, and fantastically overcrowded, but there are, as in Moscow, new buses on the roads, which is at least a promise of the ultimate solution of the transport problem.

Leningrad's shops I found less good than the 1934 Moscow shops, and of course are as the suburban grocer's is to Harrods compared with the grand new 1935 Moscow stores. There were, however, displays of perfume, chocolates, fruit, flowers, and fancy goods. The perfume shops are innumerable, but there

are no imported perfumes or powders, though in several instances the boxes are got up to resemble well-known French and American brands.

Walking in the Nevski Prospect we were interested in a queue of rather better-dressed women—wearing berets, that is, instead of handkerchiefs over their heads, and coats instead of shawls—outside a shop which had a display of knitted silk and woollen jumpers. The women were also much interested in a show of silk underwear, brassieres, and corset-belts. A good corset-maker would make a fortune in Russia if allowed to, for the Russian female figure at present may be said not to exist, though it is possible that now that Soviet women are being encouraged to take an interest in 'fashion' they will also begin to take a normal feminine interest in their figures.

Our own solitary attempt at shopping in the Nevski Prospect was a failure. Donia lost her pen-knife, most valuable of possessions to an artist. In the window of a stationer's and art-material shop we saw a number of pen-knives displayed. We joined the crowd inside the shop, and when it came to our turn to be served at last, Donia asked for a pen-knife like those shown in the window. The salesman replied curtly that he had no pen-knives for sale. To the protest that there were any amount in the window he replied brusquely that they could not be taken from the window until next week, and turned to deal with the next person.

There were, I observed, no flower-sellers in the Leningrad streets, though plenty of flower-shops. Cut flowers, however, were few and poor; the florists' stocks consist chiefly of growing plants—at that time of the year mostly chrysanthemums and ferns, all with their pots garnished with coverings fashioned of plaited strips of white paper. In many instances paper bows were tied to the stems of the plants. When we bought a chrysanthemum plant to take to a relative of Donia's, the woman in the shop was incredulous that we did not want the pot 'decorated'.

In the post-office there is a huge bronze statue of Lenin surrounded by flowering plants and ferns and palms, each flower-pot in its jacket of plaited white paper, and each plant with its garnishing of white paper bows. Postcards of past revolution-

aries and present commissars, and the inevitable picture of Lenin as a child, are on sale at a special stall in the post-office, close to this Lenin 'shrine'. There were queues at all the counters.

We disappoint our guide by declining to avail ourselves of her services for more than a general tour of the city, and refuse to be personally conducted over the fortress of Peter and Paul and through the Hermitage. We will of course visit the Hermitage, but in our own way and our own time; and for the rest we feel that in a limited time the streets offer more interest than any fortress, museum, or factory, as suggested with equal zeal by guides from Intourist and Voks.

Having with some difficulty convinced all guides that there is not the least likelihood of our getting lost, and that, strange as it seems to them, we really don't mind the fact that this independent act of ours will prohibit us from seeing the fountains of Peterhof, and the Park of Culture, in the time available, we leave the rival guides glaring at each other, and escape unaccompanied into the street. We are to have many such arguments with guides, and struggle to effect many such 'escapes' before we are through. . . .

We make our way to the public gardens and stroll along the avenues of brilliantly golden trees, pausing here and there for a sketch of some interesting specimen of humanity—an old man in a jersey, breeches, high boots, peaked cap, asleep on a seat whilst playing children run laughing and shrieking round him; a child in a bright red plush coat, pirate's cap with long tassel, white woollen gaiters, and an immense scarf wound several times round a neck already smothered in coat; a woman nursing a baby wrapped up like a papoose. . . . Thus pursuing our harmless necessary way we come to a gate giving on to a street, where once more, with an exclamation of delight, Donia pauses declaring she must make another sketch, this time of a grotesque old woman for all the world like one of those carved wooden figures sold in this country as 'peasant handcraft' . . . but scarcely has the broad pencil begun to traverse the paper before a policeman comes striding across the pavement, a young policeman doing his best to look stern.

Sketching in the streets is forbidden, he declares, firmly.

To which Donia replies equally firmly that she is well aware

there is such a restriction regarding the sketching of public buildings, bridges, etc., but that she is merely sketching human beings, and holds out her sketch-book for inspection in proof of this harmless fact. Still he insists that it is forbidden. A permit is necessary, he states.

A permit from whom?

He cannot meet the challenge. He goes red, looks confused, and has to admit that he doesn't know. . . .

At the indignant protest that he could hardly expect us to know, we who are strangers in the city, and foreigners at that, when he doesn't know himself, coupled with the suggestion that he should go and find out, he turns meekly and recrosses the pavement and leaves us standing there.

It occurs to us that we might easily do what at school we used to define as a 'bunk', but on consideration we decide that this would be (*a*) undignified and (*b*) might get us into Real Trouble.

After some minutes the policeman returns, looking very sheepish. He has been unable to find out where one obtains a permit to draw in the street, but perhaps the Society of Artists might be able to inform us.

Then Donia, the gentle, the docile, the amiable, the ever-polite, informs him what sort of policeman she thinks him, invokes the names of the great, of Maisky, Litvinoff, of Stalin himself; declares her intention of writing to all three, pauses for breath, looks up and observes a glimmer of amusement in the eyes and twitching about the mouth of the young policeman, allows her own sense of humour to invade her, and the bluff is up.

We promise not to do it again, and part the best of friends.

A few minutes later another sketch is in process, but this time we keep a look-out for policemen, because the next might not be so young and charming, or possess such an accommodating sense of humour, and it would be tiresome to be arrested so early in the journey, whatever happens to us in Turkestan.

It is not a very cold day, but everyone is bundled up in thick coats and immense scarves wound several times round the throat. It is difficult to imagine what they all do when the weather turns really cold.

This Russian passion for wrapping themselves up to excess

out-of-doors, in even mild weather, goes to the other extreme indoors, for in every theatre and picture gallery, the yielding up of one's coat is obligatory, however draughty or unheated the place may be. True the majority of Russian interiors are chronically over-heated, but occasionally they are not even adequately heated, and the Hermitage is a case in point. In this wing of the Winter Palace we shivered our way from Rembrandt to Van Gogh, and finally found ourselves in a hall devoted to a Siberian Exhibition, which seemed to us singularly appropriate. This exhibition consisted mainly of the gruesome remains of horses disinterred from Siberian wildernesses, lovely red saddles like Mexican saddles, and ancient but curiously modern-looking models of horses, horses' heads, and reindeer.

The Hermitage has the most complete collection of Rembrandts in the world, including *The Descent from the Cross.* It has also a fine collection of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings. The Gauguins and Van Goghs cannot be compared with the fine collection in Moscow, but there is a lovely *Tahitian Madonna* by Gauguin, a stable scene with cattle and angel, a moving and beautiful work which I have never seen reproduced, and a vivid Van Gogh of a tree with blue flowers, full of an intense feeling of growth, or living branches thrusting up into the air, with irises in the background, and a patch of brilliantly blue sky—the most vibrantly alive Van Gogh I have ever seen. I recall, vividly, also, a poster-blue, and poster-like, Matisse—a painter I have never liked—of a balcony scene of a man in pyjamas and a seated woman; some Monets and Renoirs, both to my mind dull painters, and some lovely blue Picassos which form as satisfactory a collection as the Moscow one if like myself you are an admirer of the blue phase of this artist's work; but there is also an assortment of the violent futuristic phase for those who prefer that aspect of Picasso.

There is a small *Madonna and Child* attributed to da Vinci which is little known, but which is surely the most beautiful Madonna and Child ever painted, all deep cool clear blues and rich warm reds merging into gold. There is in this picture no Mona Lisa subtlety in the mother's face; its expression is sheer tenderness, and the features are of the most flawless beauty. Whether it is authentic da Vinci or not it is exquisite in concep-

tion and as painting. I find no mention of it in Clifford Bax's book[1] on da Vinci, but E. V. Lucas says of it in his book[2] that 'it might well be authentic'. To quibble over its authorship seems to me as pointless and ungrateful as the Bacon-Shakespeare controversy; whoever wrote the plays we attribute to Shakespeare was a genius, and whoever painted this Madonna and Child was a genius, which is all we know, or, it seems to me, need to know.

The Hermitage Spanish collection, which includes El Greco's *Apostles*, two works by Velasquez, and a large Murillo collection, is second only to the Madrid collection, and its French collection —which occupies seven halls—second only to the Louvre. A number of collections were purchased in the nineteenth century, including that of the Empress Josephine. The Hermitage was founded by Catharine II in the eighteenth century, and the entire collection of pictures now numbers over two thousand. The sculpture department includes some Michel Angelos, and the ground floor collection of antiques covers Greek, Egyptian, Assyrian, and Roman art.

Old women huddle on stools in each gallery, ready to pounce on any visitor who leans against a glass-case or touches a painting. Every museum, like every railway station and market-place, has its old women, all alike, with their short shabby jackets buttoned tightly round them, their full, faded, nondescript skirts, their grey woollen scarves and shawls, which cover their heads and are twisted round their necks; each woman a shabby bundle of clothes and a lined, tired face. People come and stare at the world-famous masterpieces which surround them, and exclaim about Beauty, and the old women sit there, crabbed and alone, each with her thoughts, encased in a drab privacy.

The deep windows of the galleries look out on to the Neva, misty and grey and melancholy, its granite embankments flanked by stately old palaces which, like the old women, belong to the past and hold its spirit in an endless reverie.

It was a grey day, and a yellowish fog crept up the river as we watched and blotted out the far side. It was all astonishingly like London and the Thames.

[1] *Leonardo da Vinci* (Peter Davies, 1932).
[2] *Leonardo da Vinci* (Methuen & Son, Ltd., 1926).

Leaving the Hermitage we saw two strange sights. The first was an armoured car drawn up against the kerb and surrounded by soldiers with fixed bayonets. The second was a low waggon gay with brightly coloured artificial flowers; children in white dresses, their hair tied with ribbons, sat on something in the middle of the waggon. It was all so suggestive of a May-day celebration that it was a shock to realise on closer inspection that what the children were seated on was a coffin, and that the gaily decorated waggon was a hearse.

Driving out to St. Catharine's Palace in the afternoon we made inquiries of our guide concerning present-day Russian funerals. There were two kinds, she told us, the civil funeral, and the religious. In the case of the former, instead of a religious ceremony speeches were made at the cemetery, over the grave, extolling the virtues of the dead person. Cremation was rare; it was too expensive. She had never heard of anyone being cremated in Leningrad . . . and would we please not address her as *Tovarich*, for she was not, she said coldly, a member of the Party. . . .

The statement, of course, was absurd, for membership of the Russian Communist Party is as limited and as exclusive as that of any smart London Club, and *Tovarich* is the general form of address for all and sundry. We decided that she was *bourgeoise*, but it has to be acknowledged that she was more intelligent than some Guides We Have Known, gabbled less, and had less of the guide mentality. She was about thirty, or possibly younger, had been married twice, and like so many of the guides we met, had had an abortion.[1] Her second husband was considerably

[1] The abortion laws have been considerably tightened up in the U.S.S.R. in the last year, and it is now almost impossible to get an abortion for a first child. If the mother is strong and healthy the State sees no reason why she should not bear the child, since the State is prepared to give her every care and assistance both for herself and the child.

Since writing this, further news has come through, and the U.S.S.R. now frankly admits that she wishes to increase her birth-rate, and aims at 300,000,000 population by 1971. She is thus following in the path of the German and Italian dictatorships. Soviet women, like German women, are now being urged that the bearing of children is a duty they owe to the State. (*News Chronicle*, April 28th, 1936, quoting A. A. Soltz, chairman of a commission for the drafting of new marriage and divorce laws, of which

younger than herself; she was fond of him but they chose not to live together; she thought it better not; he was so young and frivolous, always wanting to play. . . . She did not tell this easily; it came out in bits; she was reticent and her reserve made her seem cold; she looked haggard and ill and unhappy. She was, we discovered later, a very sick woman indeed, with little hope of living more than a few more years, two or three perhaps. . . . Yet, strangely, she liked this exhausting and monotonous work of hers; it got into your blood, she said, with a wan sort of smile.

She was glad to be taking us out to Detskoye Selo, or 'Children's Village', formerly known as Tsarkoye Selo, or Tsar's Village, to see the palaces of the last of the Tsars; it was beautiful, she said, but perhaps we should also find it a little sad; many English people did. . . .

a bachelor tax, and provision for the children of divorced couples by deduction from the parents' income at source, are two features.) Definite instructions have been issued by Gregory Kaminsky, Commissar of Health, to the effect that abortion can only be permitted in the event that health demands it.

IV

ECHOES OF THE TSARS

ACCORDING to the leaflets issued for the benefit of tourists, 'the splendour, magnificence and lavish display of Catharine's Palace are truly amazing.' It is entirely a question of individual æsthetics whether that amazement is of the kind that beauty breeds, a mingling of awe and wonder and delight, or the horrified amazement at the depths of vulgarity to which human taste can sink. Just as it is entirely a question of politics as to whether these homes of the Tsars fill you with pity or contempt.

The drive out to this 'village of the Tsars' from Leningrad is along a long straight road known as the Moscow road. There are small wooden farm-houses on either side, of the Swiss chalet type characteristic of pre-revolutionary Russian homesteads. The landscape is entirely flat, but in the autumn it has great beauty, for it abounds in silver birches which then become Danæ showers of purest gold. Occasionally, in the near distance, the golden spires and blue-green onion-shaped domes of old churches top the trees. The palaces stand in wooded grounds which are now enjoyed by the workers on their free days. One wing of the Alexander Palace has been converted into a rest-home for Leningrad workers, and the village, once the summer retreat of the Tsars, is now a workers' health resort and children's holiday colony.

The interior of Catharine's palace—with a façade nearly a thousand feet in length—has to be seen to be believed.

'The taste in which the rooms are decorated', says the leaflet, 'the ikons, photographs, and other personal belongings which crowd the rooms, give us an intimate and clear picture of the life of the royal family.'

They do indeed.

'One large hall is literally papered from floor to ceiling with valuable oil paintings.'

It certainly is.

In some cases the pictures have been cut in order to make them fit the panelling; where pictures have been too small to fit into a panel two have been plastered in together. There is literally not a bare space on the walls, from floor to ceiling. It is as though someone had said, 'Look here, we've got all these pictures—what can we do with them?' and someone has had the idea of using them for covering up the walls, in the way in which some people get bright ideas for using up foreign stamps or cigar-bands for covering jam-jars, the chief idea being to leave no bare space.

There is a blue and gold chapel in which very thick pillars are twined with golden vines and fat golden angels which at first glance look like cupids. It is like one of those 'grand spectacles' in a Drury Lane pantomime, when the producer has piled on everything he can think of for a lavish show. It is almost impossible to realise that the place was ever intended for a chapel. The brilliance of the blue and gold are quite dazzling, and the lavishness of everything is overwhelming. Such fat pillars, such bursting grapes, such bulging angels. . . .

Donia opens her sketch-book and begins to draw rapidly. "But it needs to be painted," she groans, sketching against time, for our guide is already leading the way to further splendours. "No one will ever realise——"

Another great spectacle in the palace is a room built entirely of amber. The story goes that Peter I went to Berlin and saw an amber room in the palace of Frederick the Great and wanted it—or one like it—in his own palace, so Frederick obligingly made Peter a present of it, and the whole room was taken to pieces and shipped to Moscow, just as today Americans transport Tudor mansions. I have seen only one other room as fantastically vulgar, and that was one made entirely of shells and

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mother-of-pearl in the Kaiser's palace at Potsdam. The Tsars also had their mother-of-pearl floors. They had, it would seem, everything they could think of.

A very dark Japanese room, with nearly black walls, is filled with lovely things assembled with complete disregard for taste. But perhaps the most incredible room in the whole palace is the Imperial bedroom, with its flowery cheap-boarding-house wall-paper, its brass twin-beds draped with muslin curtains, the hideous wash-basins and slop-pails, the innumerable photographs, the tawdry cushions with pleated frills of tulle and absurd little bows and sequin spangles—mid-Victorianism rampant at its preposterous worst. . . .

Donia is so fascinated by a cushion in the Empress's boudoir that she is impelled to stop and sketch it. It is like the most revolting kind of wedding-cake, or one of those old-fashioned tinsel and celluloid Christmas-cards. You could present it to anyone who wanted a tangible definition of vulgarity—the sort of thing you might have expected to find in the Maida Vale flat of an Edwardian chorus-girl of easy virtue. For anyone collecting nineteenth century horrors this would have been a rare specimen to set beside the waxed fruit in glass cases and the ormolu clock.

"One must remember the period, of course," an English lady reminds us, a little reprovingly.

We cry that even so it is too much, so very much too much. So *much* lapis-lazuli, gold, marble, amber, such wealth of beautiful material squandered in the hands of vulgarians. . . .

It is a relief to come out into the autumn beauty of the grounds, where still pools reflect golden leaves, and golden glades offer a healing loveliness after the assaults of vulgarity on the senses.

The Empress Elizabeth probably seldom saw this autumn gold; since she never got up till the afternoon, and the dressing of her hair and her august person took hours, the best part of the day must have been over for her, except in the summer, before the heavy brocade curtains were drawn back from the palace windows.

It was the custom of the fine ladies of that time to wash in milk, and for both sexes to wear lice-traps in the form of lockets

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filled with honey. These lockets were concealed in their wigs, or hung round their necks and hidden under their clothes.

It is cynically amusing to reflect upon Catharine of Russia as she really was, and the sentimentalised version of her played by Elizabeth Bergner in the film distortion of history. Her personal extravagance was as great a public and court scandal as her love-affairs, and only a person with chronic squandermania could have furnished and decorated a palace as hers is furnished and decorated. She was a woman of culture, and a friend of Voltaire, but it is clear that her wild extravagance turned her into a vulgarian. She never, it would seem, for all her carefully cultivated French elegance, learned the fine art of discrimination.

The palace of the Emperor Nicholas is supposed to be an imitation of a Grecian shrine, and with its white walls and its comparative simplicity is considerably less revolting than Catharine's palace. Everything has been left as it was during the residence of the Imperial family, in that last tragic phase before their final banishment and murder. The nursery is littered with expensive toys; several large toy motor-cars stand under a flight of stairs leading up to a balcony with a shute; the Empress' innumerable gowns still hang in their cupboards, and the Emperor's no less numerous uniforms. The rooms are crowded with photographs and nick-nacks. There is undeniable pathos in this display of family photographs and small personal possessions . . . but it is well to remember, before sentimentalising over this, that after that Bloody Sunday of 1905, when a peaceful delegation of unarmed citizens, headed by priests, was shot down by the Tsar's soldiers, similar though smaller collections of photographs of happy domestic scenes, and such things, were left behind in hundreds of families. The last of the Romanovs died horrible deaths; but for generations the workers and peasants all over Russia lived horrible lives under the Tsarist regime, whilst the Romanovs lived in luxury. . . . But only the deaths of royalty invoke pity or anger in the Imperialist interpretation of history.

V

LENINGRAD NIGHT

WE were taken that night to see an alleged modern opera. I say alleged because its 'modernity' consisted of the fact that the music was by a contemporary young composer, and the libretto was new. But everything about it, music, story, production, was quite incredibly old-fashioned. The music was sentimental and derivative to a degree, and, believe it or not, the heroine, who was fat and elderly and had a golden wig and two long plaits, tripped down a rustic staircase and picked a paper water-lily from a glass pond, warbling away the while and clasping the flower to her plump bosom, whilst her double chins rose and fell, and her bust threatened any minute to burst her girlish bodice.

When this troublous business was over, and had invoked a tumult of applause from an audience that had chattered throughout the overture and had clearly not the slightest interest in the opera musically, the soppiest looking hero that ever strutted the boards of an English provincial pantomime, entered with a cloak and a swagger and expounded his love in passionate song, his maiden love with downcast eyes toying with the water-lily meanwhile. Enter the heroine's mother, grey curls framing smooth pink cheeks in the shelter of a poke-bonnet. She beams upon the lovers, and from a trellised arbour wreathed with pink paper roses calls her daughter home. All this pretty sugary romance, however, is marred by the fact that the hero is a serf's son, and therefore not a free man, but liable to be called upon for

service any minute. When this happens to him, rather than yield his proud spirit to such tyranny he runs away, leaving his true love to grieve alone in the best operatic tradition. We next see him in a sort of fishing village on a rocky coast, and it soon becomes clear that he has been trifling with the affections of one of the village maidens, and, it appears, brought shame upon her. He and she have a rare set-to in song, storming at each other mightily, till finally he treats her rough and flings her brutally from him. Enter her old father, to expostulate; enter the whole village to jeer at the unhappy she who is a maid no more, enter the police in search of the run-away serf; our hero gives himself up, albeit with an air, mark you, and is led away. . . . What is the outcome of it all I cannot tell you, for by this time we had had enough, and the prospect of sitting through two more acts was too much for us.

The amazing part is that an audience pumped full of Marxist philosophy should have enjoyed such sentimentality, but that they did enjoy it was obvious, nor was it merely the older people who applauded with such verve; a good time was obviously being had by all. Can it be that sentimental romanticism of this kind supplies something lacking in practical Communism? Can it be that however carefully you may educate it, human nature will always have a secret hankering after the sentimentally romantic? Perhaps it is merely an inevitable reaction from the strain of a hard life and a ruthless materialism.

Back at the hotel we find a dance band in dress clothes playing American dance music. Jazz is no longer considered un-Marxist, and what in any other country would be defined as the bourgeoisie of the city is treading the light fantastic foxtrot. There are very few foreigners in the hotel, for it is the end of the tourist season; the dancers are for the most part Russians. The waiters shuffle about in their grubby white clothes, and the tubbed palms and the standard lamps with their silk shades with bead fringes, give a false air of gaiety to the scene. Actually the palms are as dusty and dingy as hotel palms usually are, and the silk lampshades as tawdry; the foxtrot is a stiff and boring and dreary dance at best, but saxophonist and drummer beat up the rhythm, and insisted with a wild abandon that my sweetie said yes-yes instead of no-no . . . which my sweetie had

finished saying in London years ago, only the U.S.S.R. has not yet—or at least had not then—reached the state of being fussy about its jazz numbers being red-hot from the composer's keyboard.

At half-time, a cabaret of two, a smiling synthetic blonde, and a solemn dark-haired youth, do their best to produce a rumba from two concertinas, after which they give solo turns, the girl smiling all the time and making eyes at the men in the audience, the boy remaining persistently gloomy.

The audience is well-enough dressed, the men in neat suits, the girls mostly in sleeveless silk dresses. Lipstick and plucked eyebrows and crimson finger-nails are much in evidence—a fact which I observed throughout the Union, right down to Tiflis and Baku. The restaurant begins to fill up about midnight. At two o'clock in the morning the dancing floor is packed, and the streets lively, the trams still running.

We talk as we dance.

"What do you think of Leningrad?" The inevitable question.

"It is very beautiful—but *triste*."

"You like it better than Moscow?"

"To look at. It would depress me to live here. Moscow is stimulating."

"Why do you say Leningrad is sad? We are not sad. We dance, we go to the theatre, to the cinema——"

"Perhaps it is because the standard of dress is lower—it gives an impression of poverty."

"There is poverty, of course, but everyone has clothes—not very good clothes yet, perhaps, but everyone has shoes, for example, no one goes barefoot. Once the workers slept at the factories, on the floor, between the machines; now there are fine apartments for the workers——"

"But they are all over-crowded——"

"It is true we are still over-crowded, but if you have seen the blocks of new apartments you have seen also where the workers used to live——"

"Rows of wooden hovels—yes, we saw those."

"Do you not think we have progressed?"

"No one could deny it. How do you come to speak such good English?"

" We learn it in the schools. Also German. Tell me, please, what are the conditions of the workers in England. . . ."

At two o'clock people are still coming in and suppers still being served. We retire to our rooms looking out on to the golden St. Paul's-Cathedral-like dome of St. Isaac's. There are long exhausting Moscow nights ahead of us, and tomorrow night we must spend on the train, travelling ' hard '.

VI

MOSCOW REVISITED

WE are seen off on the Moscow train by a representative of Intourist, an officer from the boat, and a member of the crew who was also the editor of the wall-newspaper. We have third-class tickets, but not on this journey am I to have my first experience of travelling 'hard', for arrived at the station we find that places have been booked for us on the 'tourist' train, which has several 'soft' coaches, and we have been given soft places without further charge.

At Leningrad railway station I have my first sight of the patient crowds who sit on all Russian railway stations with their bundles, their baskets, their bedding, their tea-kettles, their children, camping out if need be for days and nights at a time, until they can secure places on a train. Distances are too great in Russia, and passenger transport is still too difficult—the transport of goods being more important than the transport of passengers until such time as there are adequate transport facilities for both—to return to your village if you have come into the city to board a train and fail to do so; there is nothing for it but to camp out in the waiting-room or booking-hall and wait for the next train, which, if it is a long-distance train, is probably not until tomorrow. To go away and come back again the next day, even when it is practicable, means risking not getting a good place in the queue when the booking-office reopens. In order to secure a good place in the queue—a place, that is, with a chance of

getting to the booking-office before all the tickets are sold—it is necessary to join the queue as soon as it begins to form, which is hours before the booking-office opens. Those who have only travelled in Russia as tourists can have no conception of how difficult it is for the ordinary person to get places on trains. Donia and I were to have plenty of initiation into these difficulties later on, but for the time being it seemed that everything was to be made easy for us . . . and we fondly imagined that soft places on a train would always mean this de luxe travel, with a compartment for two, a wash-basin with running water, clean towels, convenient lights. We did not know then that this was a special tourist train, and had no appreciation of the extent to which tourists are privileged people in the U.S.S.R. The fact that they have their tickets bought for them spares them, at the outset, the most difficult and exhausting part of Russian travel.

In the compartment next to ours on this Russian 'Blue Train' is a tall, elderly, haughty-looking American. He looks so aristocratic, in fact, that we take him for an Englishman until we hear him speak. He is accompanied by a youngish, depressed-looking wife huddled in a large travelling cape. The tall American blocks the doorway of his compartment and makes continual plaintive requests in English to the attendant to make up the beds. The attendant smiles amiably and obviously does not understand. Donia obligingly translates, at which the American raises the pale grey felt hat which sits so squarely on his head and thaws a little out of his hauteur. He and his wife are over here, it seems, in order that she might learn Russian; for no other reason, he adds, gloomily; he has been here before.

A few minutes later he is once more pestering the attendant. Donia urges the attendant to make up the gentleman's beds as soon as he can, and translates back to the American the attendant's promise to do so. Nevertheless, a few minutes after the train starts the American is still pestering. We sit tight and let him 'get on with it'. A little later we hear him squabbling over five cents change he wants out of ten cents he has given the attendant for a glass of tea. The attendant cannot give the change in American money, and rather than be done out of his five cents the American pays for the tea in kopecks.

Coming to our compartment to ask if we also would like tea

the attendant grins and jerks his head towards the compartment next door.

"*Amerikantsi?*"

When Donia tells him yes, he laughs and comments, "There's a stingy man for you! Five cents—twenty kopecks! I should like to give him two glasses of tea for nothing, to show him that we are different in this country!"

In the morning, nearing Moscow, we pass some extensive digging operations which the train attendant points to with pride as the beginning of the Volga—Black Sea Canal.

"Soon you will be able to go aboard a ship at Leningrad and travel all the way to the Black Sea by canal—from the North of Russia to the South! Think of that!"

We think of it, and marvel. This Black Sea canal will be an achievement to set beside the White Sea Canal. It means that the Black Sea will be linked up with the Baltic, and it may be possible to get into a boat at London docks and go all the way to the Russian riviera resorts of the Crimea and the Caucasus in one stretch.

We arrive in Moscow on time, and are met by two young women, representing Intourist and V.O.K.S. respectively.

Having ascertained that we were the two travellers they sought the Voks young woman addressed me thus: "I have been sent first to congratulate you, and secondly to discuss with you an extensive programme we have arranged for you. Mr. Vinogradoff sent us a cable about you."

Vinogradoff is the Press Attaché at the Soviet Embassy in London. It was with his courteous assistance that we negotiated the consulate visas without which we could not have travelled freely in the Union as we did. He had refused to express any opinion—other than a shrug—as to whether we stood a chance of getting permits for Turkestan in Moscow. He would write, he said, to Umansky at the Foreign Office. But had we seen Armenia; there was much unexplored country there, and in the Caucasus. . . .

I thank the Voks young woman for her welcome, but explain that Miss Nachshen and I are not in Moscow for any purpose but to secure permits for Turkestan; that we had both been in Moscow before, and had covered all the tourist sights and excursions. The young woman's face falls.

"We had a very extensive programme arranged for you," she repeats, "I shall have to speak with them at the office."

In the hotel bus she cheers up, and turning to me informs me that at first she had not known that I was English. "You look so much like a Russian girl, with your hair—so, and wearing no hat."

The Moscow through which the bus hurtles us is almost unrecognisable from the city one had remembered a year ago. Very tall white buildings loom up everywhere, a markedly American note in their skyscraper tendency and the bare, ruthless modernism of their design. Where had been tangles of scaffolding a year ago now stand great palaces of commerce, industry, education, blocks of apartments, a vast new hotel, a vast new library, gone is the church with the blue dome with the golden stars, gone the last vestige of the Chinese Wall . . . this is a new city, one we do not know, and one which I, with my hatred of 'Americana', with its slickness and its mechanisation, feel I am not going to like.

So changed was the face of the city in the year since we had last seen it that we failed to recognise any landmarks until we turned into Theatre Square—and then I knew for certain that I did not like this grand new Americanised Moscow, and a wave of something like anger swept up in me. Half of the garden which used to make Theatre Square delightful had been abolished to make a car park and a taxi rank. Theatre Square is now a gaunt ugly open space, immensely wide and empty, in which people queue up forlornly for the taxi that is seldom there. (I have been assured, variously, that there are from four to six hundred taxis in Moscow, but I have never seen more than six taxis on the rank in the square, and have many times queued up when there have been none at all in the hope that one would come back in a few minutes, and then another and another, and my turn come within half an hour—which it usually did; the wait was preferable to the fight to get on the trams and the even greater fight to get out at the other end. The famous Metro does not yet cover a wide enough area to make it possible, in many cases, to dispense with both trams and taxis.) The beautiful Bolshoi theatre no longer looks out across a froth of green. One's first glimpse of its pale yellow pillars rising above the trees had been so pleasant. . . . But Moscow is very pleased with its re-

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MOSCOW, ST. BASIL'S CATHEDRAL

That ' miracle of rare device ', now an anti-religious museum.

building scheme. Under it it plans to give everyone double their present room space—which would be a good enough plan were there not so many inequalities in room allocation. I know, for example, one engineer and his wife in Moscow who have a whole four-roomed apartment to themselves; another engineer and his wife have only one very small room; I know a young woman with a baby who lives in one small room; whilst a young composer and his wife have two large rooms.

The rebuilding of Moscow scheme also embraces a Greater Moscow scheme which should do much to solve the at present acute housing problem. Moscow, like every other city in the U.S.S.R., is building as hard as she can, but, cannot, it seems, build fast enough. All the picturesque little wooden houses outside Moscow are to be abolished and blocks of apartments put up in their place. There are still old-fashioned people who prefer to live in a house, even when it is an overcrowded cottage housing several families, to living in a great barracks of a building with people above and below and all round. In the Caucasus we saw a number of small houses which were built experimentally, each with their little garden, but no more are to be built; the blocks of flats were found to be more efficient. Russia is emulating America and conserving space by building upwards instead of outwards. The Utopian ideal of each family with its own little house and garden finds no place in Russian Communism. Cottages on collective farms are gradually being abolished and blocks of apartments growing up in their place. Even out on the steppes it is impossible to escape the high white barracks of workers' dwellings, as hideous and inescapable as the ribbon-building of jerry-built mass production houses spreading all over Western Europe.

Guides always wave with great pride to these ugly barrack-like buildings, invariably referred to as ' our workers' dwellings ', and they photograph very effectively with their white modernity in *Russia Today*, and as illustrations to passionately pro-Soviet articles by people who have gone to Russia—by which they usually mean Moscow—determined to see everything as wonderful and who never penetrate below the surface of things. The trouble is that in the majority of cases each flat in these fine-looking modern buildings houses several families, and the clean

efficient appearance is confined to the outsides ; enter one of these blocks and you will be confronted with dark dirty entrance halls, stone stairs covered with expectorations and as often as not excrement, never any lift, and the names on the front doors hard to make out. When one of the front doors opens you enter a tiny hall invariably cluttered up with boxes and old junk, and the walls and floors dirty. I made a point of seeing as many interiors as possible whilst in Russia, and sometimes accepted invitations for no other reason than that I wanted to see how people lived, and wherever I went I found the same squalid entrance hall, no matter how smart and modern looking the exterior of the block of flats. Once we had some difficulty in finding the apartment we sought because we could not believe that what appeared to be the broken doors of a disused lift were really the front door. This, it is true, was not in a new block, but in what had once been a fine old house converted into flats ; but everywhere in Moscow it was the same story of filthy staircases and squalid entrance-halls, and usually, in the case of the new blocks, a dirty courtyard full of washing and swarming with noisy children. The young woman with the baby who had a room in such a block told me that it is necessary to sit out in the courtyard when you have washing out, in order to keep an eye on it, otherwise it is stolen.

Which only goes to show that the adoption of Communism as a working proposition does not alter human nature. Or, if you like, that human nature will always be human nature whenever it gets a chance, whether God or Marx is in charge of its conscience.

Coming from Leningrad to Moscow was like coming from Dublin to London, so far as the appearance of the streets and the ' feel ' of the city itself was concerned. Leningrad, as I have said, has all of Dublin's shabbiness—and its mournful charm ; Moscow has the alive feeling of a metropolis ; leaving Leningrad for the new Moscow gave one the feeling of leaving something stagnant for something dynamic. The people are much better dressed than in Leningrad—and there was a marked improvement on the previous year, the general standard of dress much higher in both men and women. Several fine new stores had opened, and all manner of luxury goods, not merely perfumes, flowers, fancy goods, but rich cakes, pastries, chocolates, sweets, were available. The recently opened fine new food-stores was packed

with people who like ourselves had merely come to marvel at such a display the mere idea of which a few years ago in Russia would have been in the nature of an Arabian Nights' fantasy. Here in a department given over entirely to the sale of fish, were tanks full of live fish; in the cake department hot doughnuts were for sale. The fruit and vegetable department had a good and varied show—though oranges and bananas are not yet available, and lemons are still scarce. Moscow is almost as proud of its grand new stores as of its Metro.

It were as well at this point to dispose of that Metro once and for all. We got so tired of being asked, "What do you think of the Metro? Have you been on our Metro yet?" that at the mere mention of it I have an instinctive feeling that I must 'jump to' an expression of opinion of it at once. So—It is a handsome Metro. We used it many times. Every station is architecturally different. There is a classic simplicity of design, and a complete absence of posters which some people applaud, and others, like myself, think makes for monotony. There are moving stairways which at first fascinated the Russians to such an extent that they went up and down on them just for the fun of the thing. Now they have got used to them. Bins are placed outside the Metro entrances—all of which are different, and very modern in design—to encourage people not to throw away their tickets and litter the street, but there are far more tickets on the pavement than in the bins . . . which proves that point about human nature once more.

It was pleasant after the flowerlessness of Leningrad to be again in a city in which flowers were sold on the street-corners, and there seemed more this year than last—basketloads of gladiolas, dahlias, cornflowers, carnations, asters. All flowers in Moscow—with the exception of small ones like cornflowers—sold per flower, instead of by the bunch, and you are not merely allowed but expected to pick the flowers out for yourself; you may turn them over and over in their pails and baskets and nobody minds. Nobody buys anything in a Russian open market, so far as I can see, without first thoroughly handling it.

One of the disadvantages of state ownership, of course, from the customer's point of view, is that the shop assistants are not in the least interested as to whether you buy or not, and there is

no ' service ' worth speaking of. On the other hand competition of a kind does exist inasmuch as if a stores manager does not work hard to keep a good stock of goods, to make his window displays attractive, and to see that the assistants are civil and obliging, he naturally finds that his customers fall away, and when a stores ceases to pay it is closed down by the state, or if it is not closed down there is a department to whom the manager is answerable, and he is reprimanded and warned that he may lose his job, or be transferred to a less responsible and less remunerative post. Any customer may report a shop assistant or stores manager for lack of service, incivility, or inadequate stocks. In spite of all this, however, there is certainly no feeling of ' we aim to please ' in the Russian shop, and shopping is an exhausting business involving three transactions for every article, however small; that is to say you first join a queue in order to get to the counter to discover whether what you want is in stock, and the price of it; you then join a third queue in order to purchase a ticket for this amount; after which you queue up again with your ticket, which you give in exchange for the article. There is no such thing as just ' popping in ' to buy anything in Russia.

The worst queues are in the post-offices. Not merely are they the longest queues, but they are the ones which take the longest for one's turn to come, and the ' fug ' in a Russian post-office has to be experienced to be believed. How human beings work for eight hours a day in such an atmosphere, only a Russian knows.

Russian post-office clerks are as rude and curt as the French post-office girls. The danger in a Russian post-office is that you may wait twenty minutes or more only to find when your turn comes that you are in the wrong queue. I once saw an old woman in a Russian post-office burst into tears after a vain search to find the right queue. A man took pity on her in the end, enquired her wants, found the right queue for her, spoke to the person at the head of it, and succeeded in getting the old woman placed at the head of the queue. It is usual, in a Russian queue, incidentally, particularly in a bus or tram or train queue, to inquire who is the last person in the queue before taking your place. This not merely prevents you from taking a wrongful place—which induces a small riot—but as it were ' establishes '

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MODERN MOSCOW *Planet News*

Above : One of the Metro stations.

Below : The new Mossoviet Hotel, an example of the American influence on the architecture of the new Moscow.

you with the queue, so that in the case of any dispute as to rightful place the people before and behind you will 'sponsor' you. After a little experience with queues Donia and I soon discovered the importance of establishing ourselves in this way, and many a time Donia's friendly chats with those in front and those behind stood us in good stead and saved us our places in the queue. For there are anti-social elements in every queue . . . proving yet again the frailty of human nature, and that under any system there will always be exploiters and exploited if you don't watch out. . . .

Revisiting Moscow out of the tourist season there was a noticeable absence of begging children who hung round the big hotels during the Theatre Festival. We were, however, several times accosted by beggars both in Moscow and in Leningrad. Various 'good Communists' rebuked us for giving to these beggars; to do so, they insisted, was 'anti-social'; we were assured that there was work for everyone, and accommodation and provision for those unable to work. That pensions are not always adequate, however, I do know. I know of one case in which the old man's pension is less than the rent of the room he and his wife occupy; the State argues that the wife is working and that therefore the husband does not need more; the fact that the wife is middle-aged and works harder than a woman of her years should does not count, and the State sees no reason why she should not be compelled to work and to support her husband. In the room next to her, however, lives a baker and his wife; in this case the wife does not work at all, except for keeping the room clean and doing such little cooking as the other occupants of the apartment—who are out at work all day—may require. A single woman who has the smallest room in her apartment pays more rent than any of the others because her wages are higher, she being a professional woman and the others artisans. The old man whose elderly wife is compelled to work owing to the inadequacy of his pension was before the revolution a wealthy banker. He complains bitterly of the regime. "This," he says, indicating the small room, "is all that I have left after forty years of hard work." Yet even he admitted that 'things are getting better every day', which was the assurance we received from workers in all spheres throughout the Union.

An engineer assurred us that ' the sincerity of the Government ' was a prime factor in persuading people to work hard, uncomplainingly, in spite of a hard life. For, in spite of the fact that food is now plentiful and no longer rationed, it is undeniably a hard life; wages are low, overcrowding acute, and there are many hardships to be faced—particularly for the women.[1] The aim is not to raise wages but to reduce the cost of living. There had been, we discovered, reductions in the cost of many articles of food in the last year.

At the theatre we noticed a marked improvement in the standard of feminine dress, compared with a year ago. It is, to be sure, a very long way off the London–Paris standard, but there were clear indications of an interest in dress and an attempt to do something about it. The trouble is that the Russian woman of today, whatever the better off ones were like in the time of the Tsars, has not the slightest idea how to wear clothes. No one, so far, appears to have instructed her that the three first principles of good dressing are that the clothes must fit the wearer, that they must suit the wearer in colour and style, and that they must be suited to the occasion on which they are worn. How the Russian woman's naïveté is going to react to Schiaparelli sophistication heaven knows, and why when the Union is full of brilliant dress designers working for the theatre it should have been thought necessary to import a foreigner to design everyday clothes I for one cannot imagine. An artist friend recently returned from Moscow tells me that some Russian girls who had seen some of the drawings of the proposed Schiaparelli designs, and whom he had questioned as to their reactions, were bewildered. What are they to say concerning the work of a great foreign designer, they themselves knowing nothing about fashion? Possibly they may be going about with extraordinary little millinery contrivances perched on top of their heads, or on the sides of their heads, or clinging to the backs of their

[1] I am thinking in this connection particularly of women who must go to and fro from their place of work to the crêche to nurse their children. Factory workers are better catered for in this respect than the intellectual worker, who may have to go some distance to the nearest crêche. When I wrote this I was thinking also of the lack of anæsthetic for childbirth and abortion, but this is at last becoming available.

heads, or tipped over one eye or one ear, and wearing their skirts long or short, their waists high or low or non-existent, according to dictates of that absurdity called Fashion . . . but they will take more kindly to dress fashions than to hats, I think, for the Russian woman has never taken kindly to a hat, particularly the peasant woman, who with her shawl and handkerchief has a contempt for the hat. In a tram if she is trodden on or unduly jostled by a woman wearing a beret—which when we were there was the head-covering of every woman, throughout the Union, when she did not wear a shawl or handkerchief over her head—she will promptly call attention to the fact that the offender is wearing a hat; she will make some derisive remark about it, and the sum of her remarks will be that some people are rough in spite of the fact that they wear hats. (It is not a question of manners. You cannot possibly have manners in a Russian tram—not if you want to get aboard it, and to get out again. But you must shove as you would be shoved; there is no real need to stamp on the feet that press yours, or poke your elbow into the face that is all but biting your neck—even if you *can* raise your arm sufficiently to do so. . . .)

Several times in the Torgsin stores on this second visit to Moscow, waiting whilst Donia made purchases, women sidled up to me, murmuring, furtively, "Mon-ee?"

We had no occasion to avail ourselves of these invitations to change money, having already acquired our 'bootleg' roubles. This illegal exchange is now of course wiped out by the stabilisation of the rouble at 25 to the pound. During our visit the gold rouble was at 5 to the pound, and on the 'black exchange' the rate varied from 150 to 170 paper roubles to the pound, the rate varying with the fluctuations of the gold rouble —which had no existence except as a 'tariff' for determining valuta values. With a fixed rate of exchange the Torgsin stores are now closed down, since they only existed as a means of attracting valuta. You could not spend roubles in a Torgsin stores, and they were used chiefly by tourists, though anyone who had somehow or other come by foreign money could spend it there, and did; the Russians liked to have valuta to spend because for some time it was possible to get in the Torgsin stores a better range of goods than elsewhere; but already in

October of last year the Russians were ceasing to use Torgsin, their own stores having actually better goods.

All the same, I am as glad to have been in Russia before the stabilisation of the rouble as in America during prohibition. Now when the young things return from Russia lightly chattering about how many roubles they got to the pound, I shall shake my hoary locks and croak, " Now in *my* time you could get as many as two hundred roubles to the pound, but you had to know how to get 'em, and it was strictly illegal . . ." and it will all seem far away and long ago, like that incredibly remote period in the U.S.A. when you drank cocktails out of soup-bowls, furtively, and with a tremendous kick, because it was the forbidden thing . . . and in the not very far distant future the story of how we fought our way into and out of the Russian trams will also have become a legend which the young things will accept with a grain of salt, never having known that which has to be experienced to be believed.

Moscow in a few years' time, perhaps even by the time you read this, so rapid is growth and change in the U.S.S.R., will look like Manhattan, or the *Metropolis* of the UFA film, only the workers will all have gone skywards instead of underground.

On my first visit to Moscow, within a few hours of arriving at the aerodrome, after the twelve-hour flight from Berlin, I found myself at *La Dame aux Camélias*. This time, on the day of our arrival from Leningrad, within an hour or so of being met at the station, Donia and I were at the ballet, for a ' matinée ' beginning at twelve noon.

The moment one arrives in Moscow is like the moment one arrives in New York city—you ' get going '. But try to get anything going for yourself and you will be beset with opposition from all sides. In 1934 I made repeated efforts to see the then not publicly released film, *The Three Songs of Lenin*. In 1935 we were shown it privately without asking. We could have gone to the theatre every night and every afternoon as the guests of Voks had we wished; from the beginning they announced themselves at our service that we might be interested and amused whilst waiting for the permits we hoped to get for Turkestan, and urged that we should be as capricious as we liked in our choice of entertainment at all times. We were deeply apprecia-

tive of this courtesy, but did not fully avail ourselves of it, for in this pursuits of permits, and for first-hand information from people who had been there, we found ourselves with too much to do, too many people to see, or else too tired, for more than two operas, a ballet, a gypsy theatre, and a private showing of the Lenin film and a life of Dostoievski, during our ten days in Moscow. But the first night we were back in Moscow, seven weeks later, we went to the ballet. You can no more be in Moscow and not go to a theatre than you can be in Vienna and not go to a concert.

The Moscow theatre we found as first-rate as ever. Both the ballets we saw were new and propagandist. *The Flames of Paris* is a ballet of the French revolution, vigorously done, and calculated to keep the revolutionary spirit alive in the best possible way—that is to say without the inescapable sledge-hammer heaviness of so much of the Stalinist propaganda. *Three Fat Men* is a satiric ballet with a pleasant whimsicality leavening its propagandist implications. Both ballets were produced with a characteristic Russian richness of colour and superb artistry. A mass advance of a menacing revolutionary crowd in the Paris ballet, with a fine rhythmic movement of tri-colour flags, won great applause from the house.

On the whole, however, Russian audiences applaud too easily. In the ballet, for example, the simplest pirouettes, when often repeated, evoked wild applause. In *Carmen* the appearance of a dancer in white from under the red cloaks of matadors ' brought down the house '. The applause was merely a childish pleasure in a ' surprise packet ', for there was nothing essentially dramatic or artistic about this effect. This *Carmen* was the first I had ever seen, and a full-blooded, vigorous performance it was, too, with its rich colours of costumes and settings, and modern décor, particularly effectively applied in the opening market-scene. *Prince Igor* was another orgy of colour, with the ballet scene superlative in every respect. There were, significantly, numerous children in the audience at the *Flames of Paris* ballet, most of them wearing round their necks the red handkerchief of the ' Pioneers ', the Young Communist organisation.

At the *Three Fat Men* there were numerous ' shock ' workers from collective farms in the house, peasant women with shawls

over their heads sitting in the boxes where once sat wealth and fashion in pre-revolutionary days. These star workers were being fêted in Moscow as reward for their industry; they were being entertained as honoured guests and received by Stalin; the newspapers were full of their pictures and their praises. In a Russian theatre it is never unusual even in the most expensive seats to see workers of both sexes in dungarees and overalls, the women with handkerchiefs or shawls over their heads; they are workers who have come to the theatre direct from their shift in factory or on building operations, or who are going on to their shift after the play. Special facilities for reduced rates for theatre tickets are made to all factory workers.

The long intervals, during which a great number of the audience promenade in procession in twos and threes round and round a large lounge like the tiring-room at Covent Garden, afforded Donia excellent opportunity for incorporating our 'Moscow theatre-fashion notes' into a sketch. The women, in general, were much better dressed than the previous year, though some of the attempts at smartness were a little droll, silk shawls with long fringes worn over woollen jumpers, woollen jumpers worn with silk shirts, frilly dresses of the shapeless variety to be seen chiefly at village vicarage garden-parties; but nevertheless evidence of some interest being taken in clothes, and in some instances definite indications of a move in the direction of evening dress.

These long intervals make Russian theatre-going a very lengthy business, and tiring. Refreshments are available, but you must go outside if you want to smoke. The Russians have the excellent system of forbidding anyone to enter the auditorium after the curtain has gone up. It is a pity, however, that they have no Sir Thomas Beecham to tell them to 'shut up', for they pay not the slightest attention to the overture even at opera and ballet, and have apparently no realisation of the relation of the music to ballet—though this is also deplorably true of English audiences, particularly of the stalls and dress circle audiences, most of the real music-lovers being compelled for economic reasons to be crowded away up under the roof. There is some excuse for the musical inattentiveness of Russian audiences, for culture of any kind is still a new thing to the

masses, but there is no excuse whatever for the ill manners and stupidity of the English middle classes.

At the Gypsy Theatre we saw a heavily propagandist play of a gypsy deserter from the Tsar's army, who was finally won over to join the Red Army after the revolution, leaving his sweetheart behind—no opera, it would seem, ancient or modern, is complete without a deserted heroine. The wicked capitalist was represented by the tyrannical and avaricious old father. The costumes and the production of the play were excellent, with clever grouping and some exhilarating gypsy dancing, but the story itself was stupid, and the whole company badly over-acted. The action of each act was explained in Russian before the curtain went up, the play being done in the gypsy's own language. We had expected something more characteristically 'gypsy', and were disappointed. Perhaps we expected too much of it, having heard so much about the Gypsy Theatre.

But if the Gypsy Theatre fell short of expectation, the *Three Songs of Lenin* far exceeded it. I have never been so profoundly moved by any film as by this. It is made from films taken of Lenin during his life-time—the way in which the Pavlova film has been made—all of which excerpts are arranged to form a documentary film of Lenin's career. Scenes all over the U.S.S.R., in the maize fields of the steppes, the cotton fields of Turkestan, in the villages of the steppes, show people who have never seen Lenin in the flesh but who have benefited by his work, and who mourn his death as the loss of a personal friend. It is all done with superb photography and artistry, and the sincerity which directs it and infuses it makes it deeply moving. There is a magnificent shot of Red Square on the day of Lenin's funeral; it shows a solid mass of humanity, their breath going up in a great cloud, so bitterly cold was the day; nothing deliberately staged could have been more dramatic than that vast crowd standing there in the frozen snow under a sky of steel.

This film was for me a profound emotional experience and an intellectual stimulus. Such a film has, to my mind, infinitely greater propaganda value than all the monstrous pictures of Stalin and the tedious statues of Lenin—Lenin pointing up and Lenin pointing down—which bestrew the Union from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

VII

WAITING FOR A PERMIT

CHILDREN gathering up golden plane leaves in the public gardens, arranging them in flat bunches, making crowns of them, with a kite's tail down the back. . . .

Old women sweeping leaves; similar shapeless bundles of humanity sweeping the streets with antiquated birch-brooms that do not sweep. In Leningrad such anachronisms seem less ludicrous than in this almost aggressively modern 'Metropolis'.

But at the chemists' tremendous efficiency and modernity. Medicines are supplied here free to the workers. It is the Russian equivalent of health-insurance 'panel' service. There are counters and cash-desks, but the place is more like a clinic than a pharmacy. All round the walls are coloured glass pictures of how to administer first-aid in all emergencies, how to deal with nose-bleeding, fainting, sprains, burns, cuts; even how to give an enema, all illustrated with a medical candour and realism a little too realistic for the squeamish. There are leather couches along the walls, and very modern leather chairs and glass-topped tables grouped down the middle of the large light room. The medicines made up from prescriptions are pigeon-holed, ready for collection, on revolving stands behind the counters. The assistants, both men and women, are all in white. There is a strong antiseptic smell. The place is full of drab-looking people resting on the couches and waiting patiently in queues to approach counter and cash-desk.

A museum of mothercraft and birth-control exhibits the same modernity and efficiency. Every aspect of maternity, from the pre-natal stages right up to the nursery stage is dealt with with an exhaustive thoroughness in photograph, chart, typescript, and displays of objects connected with mother and child welfare. There are rows of unborn and still-born babies in bottles, unhappy-looking wizened little creatures with a tadpole grotesqueness in the disproportion of head to body, yet somehow pitiful. Beyond are photographs of naked women in all stages of pregnancy—proving once more that the poet who declared that a pregnant woman was one of the three loveliest things life had to show was merely being a sentimentalist. Some of the women in these photographs have their faces covered, but most have not; many are shown being examined by doctors and nurses. There are so many diagrams in the museum that one would have thought it unnecessary to submit women in the last weary and ungainly stages of pregnancy to the ordeal of being photographed stark naked for exhibition purposes. But this museum is quite relentlessly thorough, and the next series of photographs show all the stages of parturition. . . . Not being very good at this sort of thing, I turn to the glass cases in the centre of the room, full of baby-clothes, maternity belts, specimens of baby foods, children's toys, feeding charts, everything, in short, which could possibly interest a mother or a mother-to-be. There are also, all round the room, albums of photographs, and photographs arranged on a kind of shutter, with a handle, that pulls out like a drawer, piles of these slides or shutters arranged all round the room, drawer-fashion, and, together with the albums, depicting every phase of babyhood and motherhood. Questions not covered by this exhaustive display of photographs, charts, objects, may be asked of the white-overalled woman in charge. As there are only two workmen and ourselves in the place, we inquire of her whether the museum is much used by the women; she tells us yes; a great many women come in the evenings, after working hours, for instructions and advice concerning pre-natal care and mother-craft; but it is morning now, and all the women are at work. She tells us also that school-girls are brought here from the schools and given lessons in elementary

mothercraft, but they are not allowed at that end of the room which shows the babies in bottles, and the parturition photographs . . . which I, for one, am much relieved to know, for I cannot think of anything more calculated to terrify a young girl—or a young woman for that matter—into a dread of motherhood. These older schoolgirls are instructed regarding menstruation and personal hygiene in the schools by their teachers, and the visits to the museum are part of this instruction.

Whilst we have time to spare we visit a crêche, because the one I visited the previous year depressed me, and I do not want to believe that it is typical. This time I visit one on a workers' estate just outside of the city itself, and find it as bright and clean and efficient-looking as the other one was dingy and squalid and messy. The children were clean and looked happy and well cared for, and the whole atmosphere of the place was cheerful and sprightly. . . . But I still contend that the Russian child is a pale, sickly-looking little creature, and distressingly ugly nine times out of ten. The shaved heads are partly responsible for this, of course, but not altogether. I saw a pretty child in the crêche of a Collective Farm outside of Moscow, and she was the show-child of the place and singled out to do a solo dance, which she did with great solemnity and sweetness, only it was impossible not to wonder how many times a week she was called upon to show off to tourists in this fashion. She was past the nursery stage and her hair had been allowed to grow; she was an attractive and intelligent-looking little creature, stamping her way through the dance, her hands clasped behind her back, and completely unself-conscious. There were some hideous 'pathological' looking children at this crêche, and an American woman drew me aside and asked me in sinister tones what I thought lay behind the look of those children. . . . An Englishwoman cut in with the suggestion that one couldn't expect much of peasants anyhow. The woman in charge of a room in which a number of babies slept was somewhat offended at our suggestion that the tiny crack of air being admitted to the room was insufficient. In Russian Donia explained to her that in England we had our windows flung wide so that the children might breathe the good air.

. . . Grudgingly another tiny crack of air was admitted to the hot and bad-smelling room. For Russians are even worse than the French in their intense dislike of fresh air. All windows are sealed up for the winter, with only one small pane at the top, a sort of tiny door, which may be opened. In trains not even this aperture is left. The heat in the Russian home is past belief—and in some so is the smell; wooden houses smell strongly in the winter, anyhow, when the heat of the rooms draws the damp out of the wood, and this, together with the stale air, produces a positively latrine stench which I have also observed in the wooden houses of the Austrian Tyrol.

A point we observed in every Russian home—which usually consisted of only the one room—was the narrowness of the bed. Did the wife occupy the bed and the husband sleep on the floor, we wondered, over and over again. Finally we inquired into this delicate problem, and our inquiry was greeted with amusement. The husband sleep on the floor? Of course not; he slept in the bed with his wife; if you both lie facing the same way there is room enough; anyhow, said the good woman who explained to us, she and her husband had slept in that bed comfortably enough for thirty years. . . . She was vastly amused at the idea of the English double bed; why should two people want a great wide bed? Was it so that they could get away from each other? She went into peals of laughter and ran out to tell her husband.

A feature of the Russian bed is a tiny cushion for placing under the hip-bone—which doesn't say much for Russian mattresses. Certainly there were many beds in which Donia and I would have been glad of a hip-pillow; but later on we would have been glad of even the hardest mattress. . . .

A week went by and we were still feverishly ringing up Voks and the Foreign Office, getting interviews with this important person and that, beseeching this person of influence and that to use what weight he had at the Foreign Office; we had a letter of introduction to Umansky who controls the Press department of the Foreign Office; his secretary telephoned us that he would see us; full of hope we went along to the Foreign Office, queued up to get a permit to take us past the guards—for that we had an appointment availed us nothing; waited all over

again when we had at last secured our tickets of admission, and were finally shown into the great man's office. He was charming to us; the Embassy in London had not advised him that we wished to get to Turkestan, but he would see what he could do; it would take some days; two or three days. . . .

He spoke very good English, and I asked him: "Do you really mean that we shall get permits for Turkestan in two or three days?"

He smiled. "It may take a little longer. It is impossible to say."

"But it's not impossible?"

"I think not. I will do my best for you."

The interview was at an end. For three days we waited, then telephoned Umansky's secretary. There was no further news in the matter. We telephoned each day for days. There was never any further news.

An Austrian journalist to whom we had a letter of introduction promised to ask Umansky himself. He did so, and reported to us that there was 'a little hope, but not much'.

"What does that mean?" I cried. "Does it mean that there's practically no hope?"

The Austrian shrugged. "I should say none whatever. To give you two Englishwomen such a permit would be to establish a precedent. It does not rest with Umansky. It does not even rest with the Foreign Office. It rests with the Gay Pay OO."

"If only they'd say No and have done with it, and let us get away!"

But so much easier would it be to travel with permits than without that whilst there was even a remote chance of securing them we felt that we must wait.

The first High Person at Voks with whom we were granted an interview held out hope to us, declaring himself in favour of our project. It was at this interview, over tea, that it was urged that whilst we waited in Moscow, Voks should be allowed to gratify every whim within their power to grant us, so that we had but to name any play, opera, ballet, or film we wished to see, any concert we wished to hear, and they would gladly have us go as their guests, and would we please be as capricious

as we liked in this respect; and would we please compile a list of questions concerning Turkestan and its peoples so that we might go equipped with information which would enable us to understand what was being done, so that we might, it was suggested, 'carry a guide within our own mentalities'. . . .

We went away convinced that it was only a matter of days before the permits came through; we compiled our list of intelligent questions—a positive examination paper of them, and dutifully used most of the theatre tickets that were sent to us.

We even consented to an interview with a woman representative of the Uzbekistan Republic, which exhausted us as much as it bored her. We arrived a little late, as we did not know in which part of the city lay the address we had been given, and decided, since no one seemed able to tell us which tram to take, that a taxi would be quickest. There were no taxis in the vast open space of Theatre Square, and we stood waiting in an icy wind for about fifteen minutes before one came ambling in. A man who was also waiting asked if he might share it with us; granting him this favour took us a little out of our way—with the result that we were additionally late, but as we imagined that we should anyhow be kept waiting at the other end, we did not worry very much on this score. We had so often kept appointments to the minute—as at the Foreign Office—and only had to wait an hour for our pain, that we had more or less given up attempting to be punctual.

But the Uzbeks are apparently different from the Russians, for when we arrived we were shown in immediately, and a deep masculine voice immediately stated, in Russian: "You were expected at three o'clock; it is now half-past." I did not, of course, know the exact words used by the Uzbek, until Donia translated them to me afterwards, but I understood their context all too clearly from the tone of her voice, and the way in which she looked from us to the clock.

She was a very handsome woman, but seated at her desk wearing a collar and tie, and the skirt of her suit invisible, could quite easily have been mistaken for a man. Indeed, we both agreed that had we entered the room not knowing that our appointment was with a woman we should have taken her for a man; there was nothing to suggest a woman, her voice least of all.

It was a bad start. She spoke no English, and I could therefore not assist the by then thoroughly unnerved Donia with this most difficult interview, made all the more difficult because the woman herself contributed precisely nothing beyond curt answers to Donia's questions. We were in a hopelessly false position; we had not wanted this interview; Voks had forced it on us—they had been a little irritated when we had asked if it was 'worth while', since by then there seemed small chance of our ever getting to Uzbekistan officially.

For half an hour Donia worked away asking questions and translating the answers for my benefit, and muttering to me: "For God's sake think of something else I can ask her!"

I suggested she should ask her about birth-control amongst the Uzbeks, but we never got the answer to this, because an Uzbekistan journalist arrived at this point. It was explained to him that we were an English artist and an English writer, respectively, and he was immediately interested, and wrote out for us names of organisations in Tashkent who would be of assistance to us. We asked him, as we asked everyone: "Do you think we'll get permits?" But he couldn't say; nobody could say; not even the Foreign Office, apparently.

It was clearly his turn for an interview, and we took our leave with a sense of escape. I carried away with me a vivid memory of the woman's eyes; they did not look at one so much as *watch*. A few years ago this remarkable woman was wearing the veil of the Asiatic woman. It was easy to imagine those alert black eyes watching from behind the dark screen of a *chedra*. It was as though she still watched from behind a veil, the veil of her own hidden inviolable personality, an Eastern secrecy which no amount of Western European 'socialisation' could touch fundamentally. So far as information went the interview was a waste of everyone's time, for the question and answer process elicited nothing we did not already know; but the encounter left some impact on imagination which has its own indefinable value; some personalities are ineluctable however brief the encounter, and the personality of that remarkable woman is such.

Our second interview with those on high at Voks was as disheartening as the first had been heartening. Either this

second great man took less of a liking to us, or was more practical. Anyhow, there was not that flow of sympathy between us which had made our first visit to Voks so amiable. All over again we explained our wish to visit the Turkestan Republics, and all over again the beauties of the Caucasus, Georgia, Armenia were offered us instead.

"To travel in these far Republics is very difficult. In many places you would find no means of transport, for example."

"Yes, yes, I know. Tell him, please," I pleaded with our translator, "tell him that we are aware of all the difficulties. We have been hearing of nothing else for months, but we aren't afraid of them. We are not two frail 'ladies'. We are experienced travellers and we are not afraid of hardship."

This was duly translated, and the translation supplemented by a confirmation from Donia.

The answer came curtly, impatiently. I tried to gather its context from the tone in which it was delivered, and from the look of surprise on Donia's face. Then I heard it being translated:

"Mr. —— wishes me to point out to you that it is the rainy season in those regions, so the idea would be impracticable." He smiled, complacently, as who should say: "*Now* are you satisfied?"

It was too much.

"Good God," I cried, "is the weather now to be made an excuse for frustrating us? What the weather is like there is surely nothing to do with Voks or the Foreign Office or anyone else! Tell him we'll take umbrellas and take a chance!"

The lips of our translator curled scornfully, and Donia looked distressed. I knew what she was thinking, that making a scene was not going to help us, but dragging the weather in, on top of everything else, was too much. And anyhow other people had told us that it would be hot in Turkestan at this time of the year. But let them leave the weather out of it; it was no business of theirs. . . .

That outburst closed the interview and we may be said to have left under a cloud—a rain-cloud.

At the first interview it had been proposed to us that we should be the guests of Voks to the Caucasus—and beyond, always providing we were permitted to go beyond. This had

been in reply to my inquiry as to the importance of getting some of my books published in the U.S.S.R. as a means of securing roubles for the trip. We had already an adequate supply of roubles, as it happened, but they were not to know this, and I was curious to know how they thought we were going to travel in Turkestan even with permits if we had no roubles—which legally we were not entitled to have at that time. With great gallantry, then, our charming host expressed the hope that my books would be published here, but that we should not need to depend upon this for the proposed journey to be made possible; he hoped that we would graciously allow ourselves to be looked after by Voks in this respect. His manner suggested that by so doing we should be conferring an immense favour on that organisation.

Well, we told ourselves, after the second interview, that was that. It looked as though the free trip was off, and the permit never likely to be on.

"I won't be kept hanging about here any longer," I stormed, when we came out of oak-panelled darkness into the pale sunshine of an October afternoon. "We'll leave to-night if we can get tickets. Anyhow tomorrow night!"

Trams stuffed with humanity that overflowed at the exits and swarmed on the steps and rode clinging to the sides, rocked and clattered past. Children gathered golden leaves in a garden-square. Old women swept the paths ineffectively with birch-brooms. Dejected-looking, dun-coloured bundles of humanity sat wrapped up to the eyebrows on the garden benches. The skeleton of a skyscraper reared above the trees and impaled the washed-out blue of the sky. The air was cold and clean, with that lightness in it which is the quality of the air in New York City and Paris. Last year at this time I never so little wanted to leave a city as Moscow; now I was so burnt up with the desire to get away that I hated it.

"You forget we're going out to lunch in the country tomorrow," Donia reminded me tranquilly.

"Oh God," I groaned, "isn't that just like life? You reach breaking-point and decide to clear out, but you can't do it, because you've got to wait in for the laundry, or there's no one to feed the cat, or you're lunching out tomorrow. . . ."

"We can't get out of it now," said Donia, just as though I had made no profound utterance. "Besides," she added firmly, "it will be nice to go. And if *he's* there he can write out permits for us then and there, I should imagine!"

We went, and it was lovely in the country, all golden with birches, with the darkness of larches and firs like shadows in bright sunlight, and golden domes and spires rising above tree-tops in the near distances, and something very English about the undulations of valleys and low hills, all very soft and gentle and peaceful; and something Swiss, too, about the little wooden chalet-like houses, and the fir-woods, but the onion-shaped domes of the village churches insisting that it could only be Russia.

We passed a field in which women with handkerchiefs over their heads sat beside a huge pile of cabbages, cutting off the stalks and outside leaves and throwing the finished article into a basket-like waggon. So decorative was the grouping of the women and the pile of cabbages and the patient horse and frail-looking waggon, that Donia needs must stop and make a sketch. There is a lovely autumn smell on the air, and we leave the car and walk on through silver-birch woods that in snow must look as lovely as in their October gold. There are no reds and bronzes in the Russian autumn; it is all gold; it was some time before we realised how the colouring of this autumn differed from that of other countries; we only knew that it was more of a flood of colour, a great golden tide.

We come to a duck-farm; thousands of brilliantly white breasts gleam in the sunlight; the noise is terrific. We lean on a bridge and watch them, and I think of the poem about ducks, who 'look at you through black, small topaz-tinted eyes and wish you ill', which I never could see, and our hostess of crying: "The *dar*lings! Aren't they *lov*ely?" and Donia is talking about composition and line and feeling, and the superiority of a carpenter's pencil for sketching, and a young girl with a lost look on her face is saying: "Yes, yes," breathlessly, as though new worlds were opening up, and someone is exclaiming: "*Well*, now, isn't that *amusing?* Just like a crowd of human beings," and then I have one of those detached moments that happen to everyone occasionally, when one stands outside of oneself for a moment,

one of those revelatory moments, and it seems odd that we should all be standing there on that little bridge, looking at the ducks, and some Russian children sidling up to us with shy smiles and curious eyes, and this moment will never come again, I think; we shall turn away from this bridge and it will be over forever, and it has no significance, only it will be a moment I shall always remember, for no reason at all unless it was for the lost look on a young girl's face, and sense of futility; walking in crowded London streets memory will recall it suddenly, for no reason, and sitting in the suburbs drinking afternoon tea, and I shall feel again the cold clean air, and the strong sty-smell of the ducks that no one liked but me, and see the soft rise of the land, golden in pale sunshine, and know again that sense of lending oneself to something that had nothing to do with one, of being borrowed, for a moment in time, to compose part of a pattern. . . . Then it is over, and we are going on again, retracing our steps back through the wood, and our hostess is talking of a peasant's child in whom she is interested. His parents fled with him from the Ukraine during the famine; he was then all skin and bones and expected not to live; now he is fat and healthy and gay, and something of a philosopher; all day his parents are out at work in the fields, and he and his elder brother stay at home, shut up in one room, perfectly contentedly.

"But what does he do, the little one?"

"Do? What should he do? Children don't need to do anything if you leave them alone."

I disagree. Profoundly. "Children are intensely creative," I urge. "They are always doing, except when frustrated by adults. All of a child's impulse is to be doing—creating——"

"Rot!" Our hostess is nothing if not vehement. "Mischa is the perfect child. He sits all day doing nothing, perfectly contentedly."

"But he must do *some*thing!" This from Donia, bewildered.

"He sits and contemplates. You know how the sages of the East sit and contemplate their navels? All their life is within themselves. Like Diogenes in his tub. That's my little Mischa, the *dar*ling."

"He sounds a little horror." Already I loathe this unnatural brat.

We come to a picturesque little wooden house. A little boy with a large shaven head and a flea-bitten pot-belly—for he is wearing only a ragged vest—stands at a dirty window, looking out.

" Mischa, darling ! "

In a moment the window is up and the child lifted out. He is as pale and hideous as most Russian children, and the moment he is put down off he goes gambolling over the grass, like a dog suddenly let off a leash.

" Not much navel contemplating about him today, anyhow," I cannot resist remarking, with deliberate malice.

" The darling ! Isn't he *swe-eet ?* "

Neither Donia nor I answer; we find the brat singularly unattractive, and either our hostess is posing outrageously, or her definition of ' sweet ' is too remote from out own to be worth discussing.

We turn away from the embarrassing child and cross over to the house and peer in through the window. The squalor of the interior was a shock. The room contained two iron bedsteads, covered with dirty and ragged blankets, and nothing else at all. The wooden floor was devoid of any covering and was very dirty.

" That's a pretty grim room," I remark. " Is that all Mischa's family have ? "

" There are only the four of them. It might be much worse ! "

I was silent with disgust. Our hostess was also only ' four in family ', but she and her commissar husband and their children had an apartment in Moscow, and a house in the country.

And a very charming house it turned out to be, white and stately and set in pleasant gardens, its rooms large and elegantly furnished, everything about it civilised, gracious. And a most excellent lunch, with all manner of delicacies, and servants discreetly in the background . . . and late in the afternoon when we drive away in a shabby Rolls-Royce, a woman servant standing at the top of the steps, seeing us off, and an old manservant at the gates of the drive, a sudden feeling of it all being like a scene out of Chekhov, with the vague melancholy of evening invading the afternoon, and the air that had been soft and golden growing wintry with the withdrawn sun.

But I am troubled by that dreadful bare room which is 'home' to a man and a woman and their two children, and by the barefoot peasants we pass in the lanes leading to this stately house. They have hunks of black bread in their hands. Will they, sometime during the day, have as good a meal as we have just had? Perhaps that doesn't matter; nobody needs luxurious meals; what does matter is that everyone should have enough. No one needs a palace, but everyone needs decent living conditions. That family living in that room are mere beasts of burden in the fields, all they know of home a mere shelter for the night, no more than is granted a horse or a cow—less than is granted a horse or a cow, judging by some of the clean, light, airy stables and byres we saw on collective farms.

This was not a collective farm, but a state farm; not a *Kolkhoz*, but a *Sovchoz*. The state farm is not run on a collective system, with profits shared, but pays its workers a fixed wage.

I wanted to know what was being done, what was likely to be done, about that family from the Ukraine cooped up in that frightful room, but I could get no satisfactory answer. Something was said about their present conditions being partly their own fault because they had run away from their own district, conduct which is discouraged.

"But, my God, if there is famine—how can you blame them? You can't just sit tight and starve——"

And then that answer which is supposed to cover so many unsatisfactory things: "We don't pretend to have achieved equality yet—" and, "We cannot do everything at once——"

And something a Russian engineer said to me in Moscow, apropos of inequalities in this 'classless' society: "Stalin may have a better dinner than some of us, but he has no more to spend—he is not putting money into his pocket——"

But why should he have a better dinner? Why should a commissar have a whole house for himself and his family when a peasant whose family is the same size must be crowded into one squalid room?

The Russian engineer said: "But anyone can get to the top—an illiterate peasant can become literate, can go to a university, can rise and become a doctor, an engineer—anything."

But you cannot become a doctor or an engineer, or any kind

of specialist, merely by taking thought. There will always be those whose mental capacity keeps them hewers of wood and drawers of water, who have not the ability to rise beyond that; but they also serve who only sweep the streets and mind the machines and wash the dishes and perform all the other wearinesses of unskilled labour, and they are entitled to as good a dinner as Stalin himself, and as good a bed to sleep in; decent conditions are part of their right to live; can it be that a 'Communist' state has still to learn that—the elementary Marxist principle of each according to his needs? Can it truthfully be said that a commissar needs a better dinner, better living conditions, than a scavenger?

Let there be privileges, by all means, for those who hold responsible positions, for the specialists, since they more valuably serve the community than do the unskilled workers, but, shades of Karl Marx and Lenin, let not privileges be made of necessities, let not decent living conditions, that is to say, be made a matter of wages, which is precisely the state of affairs which prevails under the capitalist system. Let the commissars, the specialists, the great artists, those who do the most valuable work for the state, let them have more money to spend on luxuries, as a reward, and in recognition of their responsibilities, and as a mark of appreciation in the case of artists, but first, each according to his needs.

But it is not so; the better-paid workers have better food, better homes, a less difficult existence, simply because they have more money to spend. One engineer I know in Moscow has 2000 roubles a month and has a very comfortable four-roomed apartment for himself and his wife; another engineer I know has 500 roubles a month, and he and his wife live in one room so small that it will contain only a narrow single bed, a table, a chair, and a cupboard. Four other couples live in the five-roomed flat in which they have this room, and the communal servant sleeps on the kitchen floor.

There is time enough to give the commissars and honoured artists *luxurious* homes when every farm, factory, shop, and office-worker has a *comfortable* home. Whilst so many people are living in conditions so far removed from even the common decencies and necessities of life, for a privileged few to have

luxury is preposterous; would be unjust in any country, but in a socialist society is nothing less than immoral. Yet the commissar whose home provoked these thoughts is an honourable man. So are they all, all honourable men, these Red Army officers, commissars, delegates, who get all the soft seats on the trains, all the cabins on the boats, whilst the mass of people queue up for hours and sometimes days for the privilege of lying hours and days on bare boards and open decks.

There were many black moments in the U.S.S.R. when I found myself recalling something I heard at the British Embassy: "The proletariat sacrifices itself to make the revolution, and is in the end exploited by it." Which I thought pretty good coming from where it did, that is to say, where they read the *Daily Express* and are firmly convinced that Russians who consort with English people are in time quietly done away with, sent away and never heard of again. They are full of quaint, old-fashioned ideas and prejudices like this at the Embassy and the Consulate, but their sherry is very good . . . and give me a good honest-to-God Tory any day in preference to these muddled Social Democrats and inconsistent Communists. You know where you are with an out-and-out Tory. You know beforehand everything he thinks on any given subject, and everything he is likely to say. You know that he believes—that he really and truly does believe—that the British are a superior race, that the British rule the subject races by kindness, and on such occasions as it is necessary to order troops to fire on them or drop bombs on them, it is for their own good, you know that he believes in something called Playing the Game, which begins at school and makes all the wars in which the British indulge just and righteous and necessary wars; you know that to him all coloured people are niggers, even if they are not actually dam' niggers, and that he will sometimes in a burst of tolerance concede you that a man can be a very decent fellow even though he is a Jew; you know that without ever having read a line of Karl Marx in his life he will dam' Communism and all its works, and that to separate an ism from an ist cannot even remotely occur to him; you know that he will class Communists, Social Democrats, and revolutionaries—which in England means those who associate themselves with the policy

of the Independent Labour Party—all together as 'Bolshies', that anything of even so faintly socialist a flavour as the Labour Party is all red-hot Communism to him. Well, it is all very simple and direct, almost naive, and you know where you are with such people, which is more than you can say of a Communist or of a Social Democrat. Your Tory is at least consistent, and it is no use being angry with him about his beliefs, for he and his kind have done no thinking for hundreds of years; they have merely accepted, unquestioningly, like the simple, honest, English gentlemen they are; and when they are politically dishonest and hypocritical they don't realise it; they simply don't see it that way, and it is better not to expect them to, and futile to attempt to make them.

By night over the Kremlin flies a floodlit red flag. It licks against the darkness of the sky like a flame when the wind stirs it, and has all the exciting beauty of fire. It is a symbol of tremendous triumph, and of challenge, to Europe, the East, the whole world.

It moved me as the red flag flying at the bows of the Soviet ship in which I travelled to Leningrad moved me. As a symbol it has its own violent poetry; all the fanatic passion of the revolutionary is in its flame; it would send through me the kind of excited shiver that there is in the St. Crispin speech in *Henry V* . . . then back at the hotel I would watch the better-off Russians dancing, drinking, supping, and be unable to resist the thought which in imagination hauled the flag down to half-mast and imposed a vast question-mark over the face of the new Russia—the thought, What have these people to do with the old women who sweep the leaves in the streets and parks, with the drab figures who pass in and out of the dark noisome doorways of tenement buildings in which humanity huddles together, fobbed off with jam tomorrow in lieu of the bread-and-circuses of capitalist countries? So many people in this great Americanised, almost feverishly progressive city, very nearly smartly dressed, and so many still very nearly in rags. . . .

"Things are getting better every day. You've said yourself how much progress Moscow, for example, has made in a year, with its fine new shops, its bigger and more varied supplies, increase in well-dressed people——"

Yes, yes; but is the whole community in this forward movement, or are these better-dressed people merely the nucleus of a new middle-class?

It seems impossible to say. There is the 'transition' answer so much favoured by the Communists. There is also the answer which lies in the assertion that the government has everything so well in hand that it can check or change anything at a moment's notice. There are various 'answers' and 'explanations' which one is free to accept or reject. I can only say that I am not alone as an admirer of the achievements of the U.S.S.R. who yet regards her recent tendencies with misgiving.

VIII

KIEV, THE ANCIENT

THERE comes a day when we telephone Voks that one of us at least will go mad if we have to spend any more time in Moscow, and that we do not propose to wait any longer for permits for Turkestan; if they come through they can be sent on to us in the Caucasus; we are leaving Moscow tomorrow night. . . .

The result of this burst of action on our parts is that Voks telephones us a little later outlining an itinerary they have arranged for us. We are to go direct from Moscow to Kharkhov, then straight to Tiflis. Which is not at all what I have in mind. I say that I am sorry to be difficult, but it was to Kiev that I had planned to go tomorrow night. I had always promised myself that one day I would see the 'Mother-city' of Russia.

Voks is very patient. Very well; we should include Kiev; it should be arranged. In Russia everything is 'arranged'. Whatever your requirements, the answer is invariably, "Very well; I will arr-ange." (Except when the requirement is a permit for Turkestan, of course. And in any case it is only one of those pleasant promises which the Russians, like the Irish, are so fond of making and then thinking no more about.) So it is arranged that we shall have sleepers for Kiev for the following night, if sleepers are to be had. We defer rejoicing until we learn that the places are available on the train, and then go out and queue up in the post-office to send off telegrams notifying those concerned that we are 'off at last'.

We give a farewell party; pack into suitcases to be left behind in Moscow the things we shall not need on the journey, and into rucksacks the few we feel necessary, and all next day go about with light hearts feeling that we are already on our great journey.

In the evening we go into the Intourist office in the hotel to get our tickets and our passports, and a brusque female informs us: "Tonight you cannot go. One of the places reserved for you has been commandeered. Perhaps tomorrow we will get you places."

"Commandeered? How? By whom?"

"Who knows? By a commissar, a delegate, a Red Army officer—who shall say? But someone who needs to travel more urgently than you do. There is nothing you can do. Tomorrow we shall see."

After a few vodkas we feel better. A few vodkas are a pleasantly short cut to feeling better.

"We're off," says Donia, when we are in the taxi with our tickets, passports, rucksacks, the following evening.

But I cannot feel that we are off till we are actually aboard the train. Not even then. Not till it's started. . . .

We were off all right this time, however. We had places in a four-berth compartment, but for the first part of the night we had only one other travelling companion—a Red Army officer, a 'Brigadier Colonel', who gallantly gave up his lower berth so that we might each have a lower berth. He retired discreetly to the corridor whilst we prepared for bed, and by the time he returned to the compartment we were tactfully invisible under the bed-clothes. All we knew of his undressing operation was the creaking and heaving that went on overhead. Waking with a start during the night and looking up, I saw a pair of top-boots dangling from the berth above. The owner of them was gone by morning.

With a good deal of fumbling, creaking, and heaving under the bed-clothes, our Brigadier-Colonel dressed whilst we lay and pretended to sleep. We all three met in the dining-car later, over breakfast. He was in high spirits, and reproached us for not being gay enough: "two young women like you," said he. We were not gay; Donia had slept badly and I had a

raging headache. When Donia offered him these reasons for our subdued spirits he laughed. What we needed was love, he declared, then we should not feel tired, then we should not have headaches. . . . So it was to begin all over again, I thought, the eternal Russian topic; in Moscow we had had a rest from it.

On the stations at which we stopped there was a shrill, monkey-like babble of barefoot women hawking apples. We got out at one station and out of curiosity bought two dripping handfuls of 'sour cucumbers', gherkins, full of juice, whose unpleasant taste I found curiously fascinating, so that though with every mouthful I exclaimed how foul they were, I was nevertheless compelled to eat the horrible things. Rather, I imagine, as a great many people eat olives. These sour cucumbers are much relished with the garlic sausage and dry black bread which is the staple fare of Russian train travellers, and later on we, too, learned to be glad of their enlivenment to a meal. There was a great busyness on the stations round the buffets where hot tea and coffee was being served. We had our first glimpse of the straw shoes affected by so many of the peasants, and of all the excitement of a Russian railway platform which has all the clamour of a market-place. As we neared our destination the Brigadier-Colonel drew on a pair of white cotton gloves. These rather comic gloves we noticed were also worn by the Kiev policemen.

My first impression of Kiev was disappointing, because I had expected it all to look much older; I had not realised that when people talk of the beauty of Kiev they mean the Lavra, the ancient monastery which is a walled city, like the Kremlin and the Vatican. I had expected cobbled streets and golden domes everywhere. I had not been prepared for its hustling Manchester-like busyness and commerciality. But the Lavra, later, was to make up for that.

The Intourist hotel in Kiev has a gloomy grandeur similar to that of the Metropole in Moscow. Our room faced on to the very noisy street in which it stands; on the enormously high wall flanking the little public garden opposite was written in large letters, USE SWIFT'S HAMS. The garden was full of bright, fleshy-looking scarlet flowers. We encountered these lovely flowers many times in our travels, and constantly inquired their

name, but no one could tell us; but they are the flowers which flourish on the terraces of the Casino at Monte Carlo where they are part of the coloured picture-postcard brilliance of the place. In Russia they form rare notes of colour amid the general grey.

When we had eaten, in an incredibly ornate and depressingly dark dining-room, we evaded the guide who wanted to take us on a tour of the city, and going out into the streets found our way to the top of the Proletarian Park, now called the Park of Rest and Culture, from which there is a fine view out over the Dnieper, across to a wasteland of marshes and sandy plages with an oasis of trees in the middle, landing-stages at intervals in the water, a sort of Forth Bridge, and a mass of timber drifting down the river. The princely Saint Vladimir, who brought the Orthodox Faith to Russia with the establishment of the Greek Church at Kiev, stands carved in stone, looking out across the river in which he was baptized, to the wasteland to which the race that bred the Founder of Christianity was banished under the Tsars. There are still people living on what was once the Ghetto, in spite of the spring floods which make it necessary for the houses to be built on stilts, but the Jews have moved over to the mainland and are no longer isolated in this city which has known some of the most dreadful pogroms in a history of persecution.

This view out over the vast flat expanses of the plains of the Dnieper has a kind of mournful, washed-out, water-colour beauty, and we stayed a long time on the terrace taking in its pale colours and its wasteland sadness, and Donia did a sketch of the cloaked saint on his pedestal, after which we went on to the Children's Park, with its charming statues of children at play, and its so much less robust-looking living children engaged in quite different games. That is to say sliding down a shute, playing in a sand-pit, riding on wooden horses, instead of gracefully shooting bows and arrows, bowling hoops, or picturesquely posing with violins and palettes.

A group of nurse-maids sat on a bench, huddled into a Chauve-Souris tableau, clasping bundled-up babies to them, helping to rock a toy boat built full of children, and singing in harmony. It was pleasantly peaceful sitting there, listening to

the singing women, and watching the children playing, whilst the evening seeped down out of the sky, netting first the trees and then the earth in blue-grey veils. Already Moscow and its clatter and irritations, and the hectic pace of its life, seemed, far away, much more than a night-journey away. At last, it seemed, our feet were set on the golden road to Samarkand. Were not the trees golden, and the Lavra a dream of golden domes? Was there not trade between the princes of Kiev and the merchants of Samarkand as far back as the third and fourth centuries, the silver coins of Samarkand unearthed here some fifteen hundred years after? That romance which has no part in the ruthless materialism of the new Russia stirs here in ancient Kiev. Down this river went Prince Vladimir's merchant flotilla carrying, if not apes and ivory, myrrh and frankincense and peacocks, furs and honey, wax and corn and slaves, in exchange for the wine and gold, fruit and silks and cloths, of Byzantium. It is a story now of flour, leather-goods, cigarettes, glass, nails, sugar, beer, chugging down to the Black Sea in grubby but efficient little steamers. The Tartars, long ago, under the Mongol Batu, long ago razed to the ground the city of the princes; and the twentieth century gives us tram-lines, stores full of mass-production articles, Swift's hams, and a dingy tourist hotel, whilst Vladimir is no more than a stone saint looking out over a desolate wasteland of sand-dunes, and a wilderness in which goats graze on the sparse grass and scrubby bushes.

But here in this playground of singing women and playing children it is all romantic and sad like something out of Chekhov; and one might be miles from the vast machine that is the new Russia; one might be at Prague, standing on the hill of the Hradčany, looking out over the woods to the city massed below, beyond the river which, with its weirs under the Karlsbrücke is so like this river with its big bridge and dam-like structures to break the ice-floes in winter; or one might be on the terrace at Berne, with its gardens and trees, and nursemaids and children and lovers, and the woods going down to the river in the valley below.

But you cannot stay long in a tranced reverie in a city in modern Russia, even in a city as old as Kiev; you cannot go

far, before being bludgeoned back to the present by the hammer-blows of propaganda, and, descending the hill from which Vladimir guards the wasteland like a dream, what should we see on a grassy bank but the gigantic faces of that inescapable triumvirate, Marx, Lenin, Stalin, all green and growing with little flowers and shrubs, like Edinburgh's floral clock, a work of heart, if not of art.

"It makes a nice change from the everlasting posters, anyhow," said I, philosophically, after the first shock of awe had subsided.

"What a time the gardeners must have, keeping Stalin's moustache from growing up into his ears," Donia reflected.

"And so awkward if the grass started to grow on Lenin's bald head, so beautifully outlined as it is with clipped box. . . ."

"It's awfully well done——"

"Clever."

"Horribly. Let's go and have a glass of *chai*."

We cross a street full of incredibly shabby and overcrowded trams, and turn into a fly-blown café. It is a dingy place, with marble-topped tables and a counter with a glass case displaying unappetising-looking cakes and sandwiches. A pert-looking girl with rouged cheeks and lips, plucked eyebrows, dyed hair, and painted nails, laconically, and after a long wait, brings us glasses of tea so weak that the water is barely tinted and tastes of nothing at all. Meekly we ask if we might have two glasses of stronger tea. The waitress demands truculently what is wrong with it; it is the same as everyone else has; she has never heard of anyone wanting *chai* stronger than that. . . . We plead that we are foreigners, and in our country we drink *chai* much stronger, oh, very much stronger. Sulkily she removes our glasses, and after a long, long time returns with two just one degree less weak, but still not strong enough to give the hot water any flavour. We sit and sip, in company with four soldiers, and a straw-shoed peasant who carves himself off a hunk of black bread from a huge shapeless lump which he unwraps from folds of greasy-looking newspaper. The soldiers laugh and talk together, and it becomes obvious from their glances in our direction that they are discussing us. The peasant munches and stares. The horrible trams clatter by, and drably

dressed people patter and shuffle along the pavement. Samarkand recedes once more into a golden mist. But tomorrow night, I tell myself feverishly, we shall be on a train again, and one more lap of the journey will be covered. Tomorrow we are to devote to the Lavra and St. Sofia.

The golden domes of the Lavra were a calculated part of our golden journey, but we had not anticipated the golden blaze of the woods which surround it. Perched up on its hill, and with its cobbled streets and squares, it is reminiscent of the principality of Monaco, but instead of being built on a rocky escarpment above the Mediterranean, it is built on a wooded one above the Dnieper. It was built as a monastery in the eleventh century by two saintly brothers, and by the twelfth had become very rich and beautiful. It was destroyed along with the rest of Kiev by Batu's hordes in the thirteenth century, and not rebuilt till the reign of Peter the Great. It saw more violence in the twentieth century, in the 1917–20 civil wars, when it was used as an arsenal, and as such was the scene of severe fighting. To-day it is a home for disabled soldiers, who have their own bakery, printing-press, and workshops, and live in the beautiful old houses flanking the cobbled squares. The chapels are lavish with gilded silver and beautiful wrought silver work. The monastery itself, with its caves and catacombs, is used as an anti-religious museum, as an exhibition, that is, for de-bunking religion, showing how the monks made religion pay by selling fake holy remedies, bits of wood alleged to be pieces of the cross, faking the holy ' descent of the ikon ', which though believed by the congregation to be a manifestation from on high, was manipulated from a trap-door behind the altar. The oil from the skulls of alleged saints was sold as holy. There were, in fact, all manner of means of making money out of the credulity of the religious. Skulls are displayed balanced on silver cups, extraordinarily like prize-cups, into which the oil used to drip. The catacombs are stacked with skeletons, piled up in caves which were once prison-cells, or in niches carved out in the rock walls, or lying singly in self-internment holes into which religious fanatics crept, voluntarily, to die in a horrible self-imposed martyrdom. The young woman who acted as our guide to the Lavra—and who spoke perfect English with

an American accent—was amused when I protested that I had seen enough skulls and skeletons for one day.

"You don't like them?"

"No, not much. Do you?"

She laughed and refused to commit herself. She was a pretty girl, smartly dressed, and her clothes were obviously not Russian. I learned later that she had acquired them in America, where she had lived with her family for many years. She assured us that it is not difficult for Russians to get permits to go abroad, but she is the only Russian I have ever heard say this. It is a question I have asked many Russians, and they all declare that it is almost impossible, unless you are actually being sent by the Government in their service. Some I have asked have actually tried year after year to get permits to come to England, but always without success. I have heard, however, that there is serious talk of relaxing this strictness in the near future.

There are supposed to be four hundred churches in Kiev; there is certainly an abundance of them, piled one above the other, on the hill-sides of the Lavra, their golden onion-shaped domes rising above the trees of the woods in which they stand. On one slope of the hill there are orchards on either side a broken cobbled path which runs down to what was once the workshop of the monks, where vestments were made, and coffins. The view across the orchards to the distant plains of the Dnieper is very lovely. It was held in a soft autumn mistiness the morning we saw it; the orchards were sheer gold, and the river far down below sparkling silver in the pale clear sunshine; beyond the orchards on one side clustered the golden domes of the Lavra churches, flashing and gleaming above the golden trees; in the other direction lay the misty wastelands flowing away into a vast sea of steppes. The musical chimes of the monastery bells were a soft emphasis laid on stillness and a cloistral peace. White urns, in which flowers were planted, set upon the crumbling grey stones of a parapet above a golden wooded valley gave a curiously Southern, 'riviera', air to a corner of an orchard.

I sit a long time, happily, in the sunshine, whilst Donia makes a picture of the Lavra churches—being careful to leave the

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KIEV: THE LAVRA, WITH ITS GOLDEN DOMES AND FADED MURAL PAINTINGS

bridge out of the view, for it is *verboten* to make drawings or to take photographs of bridges in the U.S.S.R., as the guide was quick to remind us. We could both stay here all day in the sunshine . . . but we have still to visit St. Sofia, and I am determined we shall leave Kiev that night.

St. Sofia is the oldest cathedral in Russia. It dates back to the eleventh century, but very little of the original has survived the numerous rebuildings. A hard tennis-court has been built in the patch of ground between it and the entrance archway. The dark interior is full of remarkable examples of eleventh-century Byzantine frescoes and mosaics, excelling, in the opinions of some people, the fifteenth-century Italian work. Important restoration work is being carried out, the whitewash which was plastered over these works of art in the seventeenth century being scraped away and the original colours being revealed, some of them of remarkable brightness. The top of the cathedral is thought to have served as an apartment of Prince Vladimir, as the frescoes here are of an unreligious nature, depicting games and dances, and gladiatorial and hunting scenes. On a dark stone staircase I noticed a very fine fresco of hounds, remarkably 'modernist' in treatment. The golden dome of the campanile, four storeys high, is a landmark for many miles outside of Kiev. Another beautiful landmark is the Andreas Church, built by Rastrelli in the eighteenth century. It stands on the hill above the river, on a cliff's edge of the scarpment. Rastrelli is a name which crops up in Russia as frequently as that of Donatello in Italy. He was responsible for many of the fine baroque buildings in Leningrad, notably the Smolny and the Winter Palace. He also worked with Quarenghi in building the palaces of Elizabeth and Catherine II at Detskoye Selo.

The best general impression of Kiev is gained by crossing the river to the island of what was once the Ghetto and looking back at the Lavra, the Andreas Church, and the terrace gardens being built on the cliff-face. It is then that Kiev is seen as one had always pictured it, as a city of golden domes. Cross the river and a drab greyness of commercial streets, squalid market-places, shrieking trams, closes round one. You get then an impression of poverty and squalor, despite the bathing stations

all along the river for the summer pleasure of Soviet youth, and the vigorous hewing of pleasure gardens out of the cliff-face, and the several parks of rest and culture. A great wave of depression swept me in Kiev, despite the beauty of golden domes and the picturesqueness of astrachan hats and first glimpses of the 'old style' Russian peasant such as is depicted in story-books and on painted wooden Russian dolls, and copied, with improvements, for fancy-dress. . . .

We wound up in Kiev with a burst of social calls. The interiors were less squalid than in Moscow, and the over-crowding less acute. We were required, in the name of sociability, to drink innumerable glasses of *chai*, accompanied by little dishes of jam. It is usual to take sips of the tea and spoonfuls of the jam alternately. There was the inevitable bowl of small grapes, and slices of sweet, sugary melon. We left Kiev in a pelting rain, and in the company of as strutting and bossy and tiresome a female guide as ever attached herself unwanted to a couple of travellers who ever since they got off the boat at Leningrad had been trying to evade the attentions of this irritating tribe.

Thank heavens, I thought, when we saw her tippeting away on her ridiculously high-heeled shoes, her fat hips waggling under their covering of tight skirt, thank heavens we shall soon be beyond the clutches of this deadly species who talk to one as though one were a half-wit, and order one about as though one were a child.

"You are late," said she severely, when we came in out of the rain, pleasantly flushed from the warmth and hospitality we had received. "Go and prepare your baggage immediately!"

We protested that there were a clear two hours before the train was due to leave.

"You must be ready one hour before," she insisted.

"The hell we will," said I.

She looked at us coldly. "You have to have your dinner," she stated.

The idea of eating again so soon nauseated us, replete as we were with tea and melon and grape and jam and little cakes. We said with equal coldness that we would take the food due to us with us to eat on the train. We left clutching bottles of

Nazan—the Russian equivalent of Vichy—half a cold chicken, and a bag of apples. The railway station swarmed with soldiers. We shared a four-berth compartment with an amiable young man who turned out to be—during the morning conversation—a worker in the Intelligence Department—formerly the Cheka—who travelled to and fro between Kiev and Kharkhov every six days in order to spend a day and a night with his wife and family, who could not find rooms in Kiev where he worked. He gave his lower berth up to us, and once again we wakened during the night to see a large pair of top-boots dangling from a berth above, but, as before, the wearer of them had gone by morning.

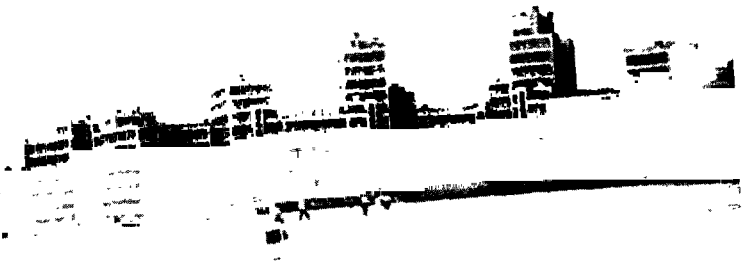
IX

KHARKHOV, THE MODERN

THE journey from Kiev to Kharkhov covers flat uninteresting country. Kiev is the face of old Russia, and the face of Kharkhov emphatically the face of the new. It is the hard, bright, efficient young person replacing the old stager. Kharkhov is very much 'the shape of things to come' in the town-planning of modern Russia. The rebuilt Moscow will look like Kharkhov, only more so. It is modernity gone mad. Or it is splendid. According to your point of view. Parts of it look like shots in the film *Metropolis*. Its workers' apartments, and there are blocks and blocks and blocks of them, are like huge white chest-of-drawers. Or piles of boxes. Wireless is relayed from street-corners, as in Hollywood. A disused church comes in handy for loud-speakers. Our guide told us proudly that there is wireless in every home.

We were taken to the park of rest and culture to see a new statue of a nineteenth century Ukrainian revolutionary poet who had been a serf. It was an immense affair, a very fine slab of granite, somewhat messed up, to my mind, by the naturalistic groups of figures surrounding it. We were driven along fine new avenues laid out with flower-beds and planted with young trees, and taken to a stadium where there were tennis-courts and a football ground. It was rather like a German stadium except that there was no *Schwimm-Bad*. The swimming pool does not yet seem to have reached the U.S.S.R. to any extent.

A feature of Russian town-planning which we observed over



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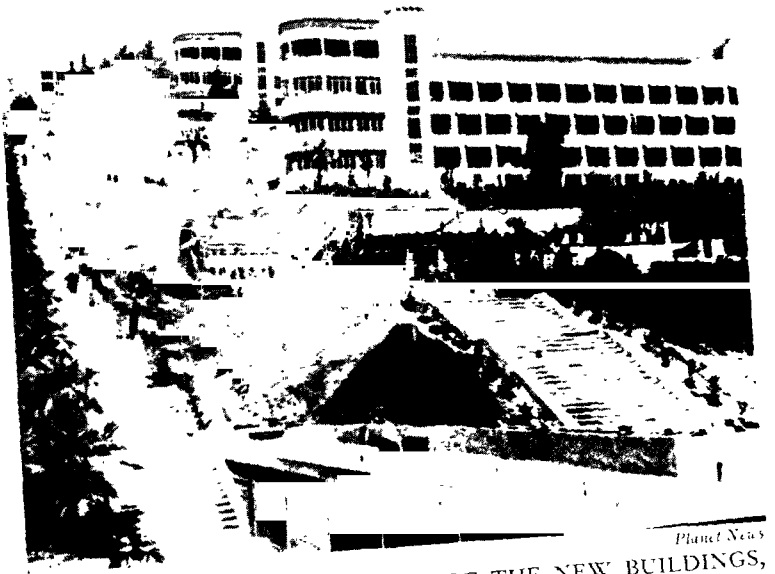

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Above : THE 'PILED UP BOXES' OF THE NEW BUILDINGS, KHARKHOV

Below : THE NEW RED ARMY SANATORIUM, SOTCHI, ON THE BLACK SEA

and over again is the segregation of workers in different trades; thus in one part of the town you get blocks of apartments entirely inhabited by boot operatives, and in another pile of boxes live all the workers of some other vast factory, an arrangement which divides the town up into communities, each with its own park of rest and culture, its own group of shops, its own school. Whether it is a good thing to live amongst the people with whom you work, in this segregated fashion, is debatable. It makes, one would imagine, for a monotonous existence. But that it is convenient there is no denying, for the workers' dwellings are usually built round the factory. In the new Russia there is little room for individualism anyhow, so if you work with boot operatives you might as well live amongst them, eat with them, play with them, escape them never. And work is increasingly the chief thing in Russia. From one end of the Soviet Union to the other there is an unceasing and tremendous drive. Does one miner hew more coal than another, the papers blaze with it! A cotton operative who can handle more looms than another becomes a hero or a heroine. Now the Stakhanov movement is sweeping the country, which is an enormous drive to increase productivity. To beat the star worker in a factory, mill, mine, has become a craze. It is a new form of record-beating. This passionate devotion to an ideal is admirable, but it can be horrifying too. When work becomes a mania, what happens to that thing in man which for want of a better name we call a soul? Every worker in Russia is a unit in the vast machine of production, and the machine is accelerating in a relentlessly unceasing speed-up. Faster! Faster! shrieks the propaganda department which has taken the place of the Bosses, and faster and faster the wheels go round, and higher and higher mount the statistics of production in a frenzy of propaganda-fostered idealism on the part of the workers. It is amazing, and it is terrifying. The workers of the U.S.S.R. with their work mania, their piled-up boxes of dwellings, their segregation into groups for living purposes, propaganda for more and more and more production endlessly pumped into them, stand a good chance of becoming a race of robots.

In Kharkhov I found these reflections irresistible. It is so very much a 'Metropolis' for Robots. The old part of the town is just ordinarily shabby and commercial, with the usual drab

crowds and overcrowded trams, and of no particular interest and certainly no beauty. The only gay-looking thing we saw in Kharkhov was a funeral, bright with wreaths of gaudy paper flowers. The motor lorry which bore the coffin, with children sitting beside it in white dresses, was followed by a small procession of mourners carrying red flags and wreaths of artificial flowers. We saw nothing that was beautiful. Even the flowers at street-corners and in the shop-windows had a shoddy look.

We were taken over a Children's Club, which appears to be the great show thing of Kharkhov. It is in a very pleasant modern building, and is furnished in the most appalling taste, with a predominance of peacock blue and strawberry-ice pink plush. Children come here from their schools to do extra study of any special subject that interests them—such as engineering —or to read the papers, play chess and other games. There is a laboratory, a gymnasium, a toy-room for the little ones, a puppet-theatre, a cinema, a room full of models of rolling stock. One room is used by the children as a carpenter's shop, another for engineering work, another for chemical experiments, and so forth. We looked into the cinema hall and saw a group of children watching a film showing timber being felled, sawn, transported. The film was shown without music. We went into a circular room with plush benches all round the walls and saw a kaleidoscope show, a sort of chandelier suspended from the ceiling rotating and all manner of colours being reflected on ceiling and walls. I failed to elicit the point of this demonstration, and the children gave an impression of watching docilely but without being impressed or even particularly interested. We were shown the puppets used in the theatre—and the Russian puppet theatre is very good indeed—and looked into a work-room and saw a woman making and painting the little wooden figures. The whole place swarmed with children of all ages. We were not permitted to enter the rooms in which a class was in progress, though we invaded several such rooms unwittingly. It all seemed a good idea well carried out, but whoever is responsible for the interior decoration, the colour-schemes and the furnishing, should have known better. Whatever else the club gives the children culturally it certainly won't give them any idea of what constitutes an artistic interior.

Having satisfied our guide by 'doing' the Children's Club, and finally succeeding in convincing her that we really didn't require her services any longer, we went off to prowl about the town on our own, and ended up in a large and grand and gloomy café full of dusty-looking plants, laconic waitresses, stale and dusty-looking cakes in glass-cases on a counter, and the cacophony of a monstrous loud band. In the dark entrance hall a huge stuffed bear stood supporting a lamp, reminding one of the stuffed bears of the Grand Hotel in Moscow. Over glasses of the usual weak *chai* we decided that Kharkhov was a good place to get out of, and if we could get seats on the night-train we would leave that evening.

The hotel was dingy and depressing, and the bleak room allotted us above a noisy street did not suggest that we should sleep any better there—if as well—as on a train.

"But I must make a sketch of the hotel staircase before we leave," said Donia.

I agreed with her. Such a staircase has to be seen to be believed. It was the last word in rococo. Even the Tsars could not have exceeded its florid vulgarity. At the foot of it, on either side, were statues of semi-nude, simpering females, coyly draped, and offering a pretence at modesty quite out of keeping with the vast amount of flowing drapery at their disposal. At intervals at each side as one mounted the stairs there were ledges and pillars above the bannisters supporting large and hideous vases containing dreary plants tied up with paper bows. The whole thing was very nearly magnificent in its vulgar frightfulness and frightful vulgarity.

I left Donia making a sketch of it, and went in search of information as to the possibilities of leaving Kharkhov that night.

Luck was with us, for not merely did we get sleepers for that night, but 'International' sleepers, that is, a two-berth coupé such as we had travelled in from Leningrad to Moscow. But the violent latrine smell which assaulted us the moment we boarded the train, and which could not be escaped even by closing the doors of our compartment, saved us from any amiable illusion of travelling de luxe.

X

ROSTOV-ON-THE-DON

GOING South from Moscow, Rostov is the beginning of the Caucasus and the traveller's first glimpse of the steppes. The flatness which has characterised the landscape from Kiev continues. Herds of cattle graze in an almost grassless wilderness of rust-coloured weeds. It is not worth while looking out of the window until you come to a station, and then everything becomes suddenly intensely exciting. There is a shrill monkey-like babble of women's voices. Behind the palings bounding the station the women stand in rows, handkerchiefs over their heads, shawls folded over their breasts, on the trestle tables in front of them earthenware jugs of milk, hot milk and sour milk, bowls of eggs, bruised green apples, doubtful-looking tomatoes, piles of grapes. Women and children run up and down between the lines offering cooked chickens, plates of fried fish, rough home-made pastries, coarse-looking scones. There is a wild scramble down from the train, which seems very high above the lines, for the platforms are on a level with the track, and a stampede of men and women clutching tea-kettles and rushing towards the boiling water-tanks. A boiling water queue is formed immediately at every station at which the train stops for a few minutes. When the train starts again it is always pursued by kettle-clutching passengers who had daringly refused to leave their place in the queue even though the train had started. How some of them ever get aboard again is a miracle, for very often the steps up to

the coaches are several feet above the track, and difficult to ascend even when the train is at a standstill. Once someone did get left, but that is a story for later on. . . .

After we had left one station we found the train had been boarded by a beggar, a jittering, seemingly mentally deficient and semi-paralytic youth, who collected a few kopecks unrebuked by the guard, and dropped off at the next station.

Rostov has the Manchester-like commerciality about its streets which characterises Kharkhov, but with this redeeming feature, that on one side of its main street all the turnings slope down to the Don. These side-streets are cobbled and planted with acacias, and flanked by shabby but pleasantly summery-looking houses, with shutters and balconies and in some cases verandahs.

The Don is lively with red-sailed fishing-boats, timber-laden barges, tramp steamers, and on its far side there is the great sweep of the steppes spread out in a great plain that reaches away to that world's edge where earth and sky meet. From the villages huddled down there in the steppes, below Rostov, came the Don Cossacks, who lived under a communal system long before communism, and gave special military service in return for special privileges, until with the Statute of 1829 the officers and civil servants became specially endowed land-owners, which seems to have spoiled the loyalty and enthusiasm of the Cossacks as soldiers, and to have been an end to the give-and-take spirit of the communal arrangement.

The first Russian literature I ever read was Tolstoy's *Twenty-Three Tales of the Caucasus*, which I read as a child, and which with its stirring stories of fierce ruthless Cossacks excited me so much that my heart would race as it has never raced over any story since. The heroes of those stories, as I remember them, are always dodging the Cossacks, or being pursued by them, or taken prisoner in their villages and about to suffer the most frightful tortures; whenever anyone escaped from anywhere his greatest danger was always the Cossacks; the wild and terrible Cossacks. Perhaps memory exaggerates the excitement of these stories; perhaps re-read now they would not seem so very thrilling, but certainly for me as a child they were literally breath-takingly exciting, and such are the influences of our childish impressions that when I stood above the Don looking out over

the steppes, the association of ideas hitched Don to Cossacks in my mind, with a little shiver of excitement.

Which I am aware is not the correct Marxist reaction to the sociological significance of the passing of the old-time Cossacks, but not being a Communist I take leave to react romantically instead of sociologically whenever I choose.

(Your good Marxist is always concerned with social significance. In practical Communism, art and beauty must serve a social purpose, be the handmaidens of propaganda, otherwise they do not justify their existence. Beauty alone is no good *raison d'être.* A cherry tree by moonlight has no value unless it bears a good crop of cherries in due course; otherwise cut it down as useless. Its sole *raison d'être* is to bear fruit, not to look beautiful. If it inspires a poet to write an exquisitely lovely poem about it, the poem is of value only as it has social significance; if its quality is merely lyric it is valueless. This materialist, propagandist attitude has resulted in a photographic realism in contemporary Soviet painting. On the same grounds Chekhov is in disrepute because great artist as he was he offers no solution to the human and social problems he depicts with such sensitiveness. Gorki[2] is the idol, Gorki the materialist who urges his fellow-writers to use their art for the furtherance of the socialist state, and is contemptuous of the literature which, having no social significance, does not so serve.

As I write this, Shostakovitch, the brilliant young Soviet composer of the music of the *Lady Macbeth* opera, has been attacked by *Pravda* and rebuked by the Society of Soviet Composers for 'non-Soviet tendencies' in his work, and for 'writing above the heads of the working masses'.[1] This compulsion to toe the Marxist line is one of the severest criticisms of Communism. Granted that all great art has something to say, what it has to say is not necessarily of social significance; it may be well beyond any materialist reckoning. But the Marxist assessment takes no count of unheard melodies or songs without words; its assessments are entirely materialist—which in practice means that when an artist feels he has something new to say—in music, literature, sculpture, or any other field—he must first consider whether it would be above the heads of the masses,

[1] *News Chronicle*, Feb. 14th, 1936.

[2] Gorki has died since this was written.

whether what he has to express has social significance. It is preposterous. It is the death of any art worthy of the name because it is the death of that spontaneity in which the vitality of all art is centred.

It has significance that in the Voks office in Moscow, before we set out on this journey, my assertion that I wanted to go to Turkestan to get material for a *travel* book, not one more book for or against the U.S.S.R. from the sociological angle, was frowned upon. I wanted to make them realise that first and last I am a writer, and as such imaginative and romantic, and that therefore Samarkand and old Bokhara were of far greater interest to me from the romantic angle than the sociological one concerned with the socialisation of backward peoples. " I want to describe these ancient cities," I cried, " their ruins, their sunsets, their people." As soon as I had said it I knew that from the point of view of enlisting their aid in trying to secure a permit it was quite the wrong thing to have said. Had I expressed a passionate interest in the new machinery in the cotton-fields, the percentage of unveiled women, the extent to which blocks of modern flats are replacing the ancient adobe houses, they would have been sympathetic and eager to help. They showed us a number of photographs. Some were very beautiful studies of different types of people, but whenever we exclaimed, " What a beautiful photograph ! " we were always hurried on to a dull and inartistic photograph of cotton operatives at work, or of a new tractor, or some other purely sociological study, and these we were required to examine in detail. There were anxious inquiries about the nature of the book I proposed to write. I stressed that I was not proposing anything of a text-book nature, nothing of a political or sociological nature. They looked very troubled indeed at that. They were horrified when they discovered that I proposed to devote only two months to the expedition. " What can you see in that time ? " they demanded, almost angrily. I said that in a place so strange and to European eyes utterly foreign as Central Asia what I would observe in a week would be almost enough to make a book ! At that they threw out their hands in a gesture of despair. In this matter of the sociological versus the romantic viewpoint we quite simply did not speak the same language. I left Donia, the Communist, to repair the

havoc by a string of sociological inquiries calculated to prove that despite the 'frivolity' of her literary friend she at least was a serious person who viewed the proposed expedition in the correct Marxist light.)

Whilst we stood gazing at the Don and the steppes a swarm of children came pouring down the uphill street behind us, surging about us, chanting, "*Amerikantsi, Amerikantsi,*" and crying, "*Aufwiedersehn,*" and "*Bon Jour*". They listened with interest when Donia informed them that we were not Americans, but '*Anglichanki*', and that the English word for *Dosvedanye* was Good-bye. They were bright-looking children for the most part, though poorly dressed, but recalling the incident of the mob of children in the Spanish town of Andraitx,[1] a kind of Pied Piper nightmare in which there had been nothing to do but sit down on some steps by the side of the road and stare the crowd out, I was glad that we had a car in which to take refuge from their curiosity.

There was a horrible mistral-like wind blowing on our first day in Rostov, the sort of wind you get in Marseilles, and which sets your nerves on edge and fills your eyes and mouth and nostrils with grit. In the main street, and down by the river, it was tolerable, but when we drove out to the new part of the town, it blew the loose white dust of the wastelands, where the new buildings are growing up, into a veritable sand-storm, so dense that at times we could hardly see the monotonously barrack-like buildings to which the guide—inevitably—pointed with such pride. She pointed out to us a number of little old houses with tiny gardens shortly to be demolished and the occupants moved into modern flats, and we recalled the guide at Kiev drawing our attention to a few small houses built to accommodate one or two families which had been erected experimentally, but found to be not so convenient as the flats, 'where the workers have better accommodation'. This guide, too, added a comment on the English passion for individuality—'the English like the small houses better'.

"And you?" I asked, "which do you prefer?"

"Oh, it is better to have an apartment. It is more efficient."

At our request she obtained permission to take us over a flat

[1] See *Forever Wandering* (Jarrolds).

in one of the modern blocks built up round a factory. In Rostov as in Kharkhov small 'towns' are growing up round the factories. One factory employing 17,000 hands yields a workers population of 25,000 for the occupation of the great blocks of apartments built round it. These workers' communities have their own pleasure parks and sports stadiums.

The flat over which we were shown consisted of two living rooms, a bedroom and a kitchen. It was occupied by a married couple, their child, and a maid. It was very clean, with polished wooden floors, centrally heated, light, and comfortably furnished. The child, about three or four years old, sat playing on a rug on the floor. We expressed surprise at its not being in a crêche, but the guide said that there was no need when the parents could afford a maid to look after it at home. This was the apartment of well-paid workers; I should have liked to have examined the apartment of poorer workers, but ringings at various other bells produced no answer. "But the flats are all much the same," the guide assured us. "Each family has its own apartment." In no city did we find the chronic overcrowding of Moscow.

I inquired of the guide whether it was economic necessity or preference which took all the women out of their homes and sent them into offices, shops, factories, fields, in Russia today, and she admitted that in very many cases it was a matter of economic necessity, the husband's wages alone being insufficient, but she added, "But most women prefer to go out to work. I do myself. It is more interesting than working at home; a woman in a factory feels that she is contributing something to the State, which she cannot feel at home. But very often where there are several children the women stay at home."

Whether a woman is more usefully employed minding a machine than minding a baby is, I submit, a nice point. I did not, however, submit it to the guide, for I felt that I knew all the Marxist answers she might make. Almost I could hear her reeling it off, 'The emancipation of woman first becomes possible when she is able, on an extensive social scale, to participate in production, and household work claims her attention only to an insignificant extent.'

It may have been that irritating wind, or it may have been

reaction against the greasy food, the flypapers on the window-sills of the dining-room of the hotel, the flies buzzing up and down the panes, and falling into the food; it may have been just travel-tiredness plus a weariness of drab clothes and bad food, but that night I wrote in my diary:

'Query—Is Communism the death of individuality? Not "individualism" in the Marxist sense, capitalistic, property-owning, but in the sense of not conforming to the mass-idea? The individuality of little houses is sacrificed to the greater efficiency of communal living; family life is sacrificed to the building up of the State; but what of the woman whose deepest instinct is rooted in her home, and of the man lacking the Robot mentality, who has no taste for being one of 17,000 shoe operatives working in the same factory, living in the same block of apartments, an efficient factory-hand and nothing more, the man who does not see himself as a unit in the vast sum-total of the State, but as an individual who will, as the French say, wear his hat on the wrong side of his head if it pleases him, and to hell with efficiency in living, and the correct Marxist attitude to this and that. . . .

Aren't the Russians too complacent over their achievements, not knowing what is being done in other countries? Tourists, impressed by this and that done for the welfare of Russian workers, are apt to forget that capitalist countries have their clinics, crêches, playing-fields, "welfare" organisations attached to factories. It is not these things in themselves which are so remarkable, but that *Russia* has been able to achieve them. Many of the things which tourists rave about in the U.S.S.R. are actually less good than those which obtain in capitalist countries, a fact which the rabidly pro-Soviet enthusiast is apt to overlook; the important consideration is that after centuries of tyranny under the Tsars the workers have at last been able to achieve these benefits. *In the U.S.S.R. all achievements can only be judged on what has gone before—the dialectic attitude, that is to say, must be brought to bear.* This is important.

But preferable a thousand times our "garden cities" and suburbs, however "bourgeois", to these barracks and boxes in which the Russian workers are confined. . . .'

The following day, the sun shining and the wind having

dropped, we resisted the guide's suggestion that we might like to visit a factory, and yielded to the alternative suggestion of a collective farm—for which she seemed grateful.

Driving out of Rostov we paused to examine the excessively modern theatre, like a wedge of cheese between glass towers. Immediately outside the town great expanses of waste-ground are being redeemed for the growing of vegetables. The soil here in the Don valley is very rich. The day was so crisp and bright, and it was so good to be away from the clatter of the streets and drabness of the city, that by the time we arrived at the farm we were all three in high spirits.

"What do you want to see?" the guide inquired as the car turned into the wide grass-grown street of the collective village, with its little wooden houses on either side. "Would you like to see the cows or the pigs or the chickens? Perhaps the cows and pigs are all out in the steppe, and we had better get out and look at the chickens."

"I hate all chickens except roasted," I protested, "I refuse to look at collective chickens."

The guide laughed. "Then perhaps you would like to look at individual chicken over there, whilst your friend and I go and look at collective chicken here."

I got out and walked about and sniffed the clean autumn smell of grass and earth and trees, and looked at individual chickens and stroked the head of a presumably individual donkey and dreamed a little over the golden domes of a church rising above a golden orchard down by the river, and thought with a shocking lack of social conscience how I would sooner be a housewife in one of these little wooden dolls' houses with a bit of garden and orchard attached, looking after the home and the children of my man, than be a shock worker in a factory in the town and live in a drawer in a chest-of-drawers, with my children away all day in a crêche, and no home-life worth speaking of. I sat on a wall under a twisted old apple-tree, and an individual chicken wandered up and pecked at my feet, and the individual donkey went strolling about in its individual way, and there was the friendly yapping of an individual dog, and an individual cat sunning itself on a verandah, and individual me unconcerned with the annual output of collective crops or the housing of

collective chickens, but dreaming in sunlight of golden domes and golden leaves and golden Samarkand . . . always in my mind this map of Russia, the narrowing down of the great open spaces to that mountainous strip between the Black Sea and the Caspian, the Caucasus, and here was the beginning of the Caucasus; how should I not dream of Samarkand—how could I care for collective chickens or crops or output?

"You're being unduly frivolous," scolded Donia, returning from the collective poultry run. "What is the use of coming here if you don't look at things?"

"I've been looking at a lot of things," I told her, "and now I want to go and see that church with the golden domes."

"Well, you can't. We came here to see the collective farm. You can see a church with golden domes any time."

"I brought you out to enjoy yourself," I muttered, sotto voice. "Now—well, enjoy yourself!"

"I want to see in one of the little houses," I said, like a child asking for a sweet.

The guide smiled. "I will ask."

She knocked on the door of the little house behind me, and an old woman with a white handkerchief over her head, and looking exactly like all the Russian peasant-woman dolls one has ever seen, smiled at our request and admitted us. A young woman we discovered later to be her daughter emerged from the interior. They seemed amused that we should want to see their house.

"Ask them," I urged Donia, "why they are not working in the fields." I so much wanted to find a Russian woman who stayed at home because she preferred it. . . .

But it was no use. They were at home because at that time of the year there was not a great deal of outdoor work. In the spring and summer they did of course work on the land.

They had the little house to themselves, they and the man of the house. It was comfortable enough, with the usual narrow bed, the usual collection of photographs, the usual plants and musical instruments, and the usual sealed windows and suffocating heat. There were two rooms with a bed in each, and a kind of kitchen-scullery place littered with roots and field implements. There was not much, I suppose, to choose between

it and the average English farm labourer's cottage, except that the farm labourer would have a double bed and at least one easy chair. The house both inside and out was very little different from that of the brigadier on the collective vegetable farm near Moscow which we had visited.

The brigadier of this farm was a delightful person, wearing his huge astrachan hat at a rakish tilt, and flirting with us in the gayest and most charming manner. In his office balalaikas hung on the wall in a row, together with a string of onions. He took down a balalaika and asked us if we could play. When we said no he laughed and said it was a pity, and began strumming an air himself. Then he remembered that he had not shown us the irrigation of the farm, and off we must go to examine the dykes and ditches and sluices beside a clump of castor-oil bushes, concerning which he needs must make a ribald joke when out of curiosity we try to crack the black seeds between our teeth. If we want anything to chew, he says, here are sunflower seeds, and produces a handful from his pocket. Chewing and cracking and spitting we trot after him examining piles of carrots being sorted by women squatting in a yard stacked with these decorative roots. The brigadier sorts through a pile till he finds two tender young ones, then, munching, we follow him to another yard full of cabbages, being graded, and their outside leaves snipped off, ready for market, by more squatting women with white handkerchiefs over their heads and shawls folded over their bosoms; then on to a yard, stacked with beetroots, then long sheds full of seed potatoes. We are shown the dining-hall, and the brigadier points to posters reproducing drawings of himself. He looks very dashing in these drawings, and he is very proud of them. He looks quite dashing in reality, but not so film-starishly so as in the posters. The dining-hall is used for all sorts of purposes, meetings, socials, and so forth. It is pleasant enough, like any other hut dining-hall one has ever seen. We are shown the kitchen, swarming with flies. I have never seen so many flies. The kitchen of the children's crêche of the farm similarly swarms with flies. The children, however, look happy and healthy enough, very different from the pale children of the Moscow crêches. The stacks of cabbages swarm with flies. In spite of the brigadier's gaiety and charm it is a relief to write

our piece of praise for the efficiency of the collective in his visitors' book, and drive off to the vineyards, which, with their poles and vines, look like Kentish hopfields.

Here we find the grape brigade, all women, at work trimming the vines. They are decorative with their shawls and handkerchiefs and striped petticoats, and Donia once more sharpens her pencil and removes the elastic band from her sketch-book, whilst the guide and I wander away through the vines and come out on to a cliff's edge above the river.

We stretch out on the grass, grateful for the mellow autumn sunshine, the quietness, the smell of sun-warmed grass. Far away across the vineyards and the fields the wedge-of-cheese of the Rostov theatre stands out, a bold modern landmark, whilst close by are the clustered domes of the old church, like an outpost of the old Holy Russia.

Far down below the Don is lively with red-sailed fishing-boats and fussy little paddle-steamers. Beyond the river is the vast sweep of the steppes. The immensity of this plain flowing away to the sky-line in all directions is overwhelming. It holds the sky's own sense of infinity. Perhaps it is its utter flatness which makes it seem to the eye vaster than the wastes of mid-Atlantic. You feel that it is only tolerable viewed from above, like this ; that if you were down there you would dwindle to an ant-size insignificance. There is a nightmare quality in the very thought of being set down in that seemingly illimitable open space. Viewed from above it is magnificent, exhilarating in its magnitude. The clusters of villages sprinkled about, and the domes and spires of churches thrusting up, do nothing to relieve that sense of utter flatness ; they merely scratch its surface, are the ripples on its great empty sea. The shadows of clouds move over it, and a great wind, and something for which there is no definition, but which some people, attempting to confine the infinite in words, call God.

Tiny blue and yellow flowers vibrate in the great hill-top wind that sweeps up out of the steppes. There is a fugitive scent of wild thyme.

I do not want to see any more stacks of cabbages humming with flies ; I simply do not care what is the annual output of produce from this or any other collective ; I refuse to be im-

pressed by any more statistics, to be waved to any more barrack-like blocks of 'our workers' dwellings', to admire any more parks of rest and culture, to be shown any more cropped-headed crêche children at play, to be screamed at by any more guides; so far, I tell myself, I have been very patient and have absorbed an astonishing number of facts and figures; I have sat up and taken notice until my back has ached and my head swum with it; I have been 'sociological' enough; now I will be as romantic as I please and contemplate the flower in the Russian grass, the shadow of a cloud upon the steppes. . . .

"Tell me, please," says the voice of the young woman at my side, "you have read, of course, Shokolov's book, *Quiet flows the Don?*"

"Yes." I found the book hard-going and I do not want to be launched upon a discussion of it, for I am apparently the only person of all the thousands who read it who found it difficult.

"He is a great writer, you think?"

"Yes." For civility's sake I feel constrained to throw in the information that I met him once in London, at the Soviet Embassy. It is a tactical error, for lying on her back and staring at the sky she drones at me, "Tell me, please, what are the conditions of the workers in England."

No, my heart cries, No, no, I won't answer. I've had enough of this sort of thing. Everywhere we go. And afterwards you will ask me if I believe in God, if I am married, and if I am a member of the Communist Party, and then you will talk of love. Oh yes you will. If I give you the chance. Why can't we have a rest from capitalism, marriage, God, sex. Why can't we just lie here and look at the sky, and contemplate the shadows of clouds, and let the great wind go over us? We can't because you're a modern Russian, and your social conscience is so trained that it dominates your life, and you can't chain the dam' thing even lying on the edge of a vineyard in the sunshine, with infinity spread out at your feet. . . .

I pick a little yellow flower and rolling over on to my side lean over her and hold the delicate shining thing beneath her chin.

"In England we say it means you like butter, if there's a golden shadow on your chin," I tell her.

"Butter has been very expensive here," she informs me, "but it is cheaper now. Altogether the cost of living is lower these last months. Tell me, please, how is it in England? . . ."

I sit up, acknowledging defeat. "My friend can tell you more of such things," I mutter. "I think we should go and find her. . . ."

She goes ahead of me, leading the way, and I dawdle behind, tracking that fugitive scent of wild thyme to a sun-warmed boulder in whose shelter it grows. Upon such a stone Mallarmé's faun might have lain dreaming away the afternoon in erotic reverie; or a goat-foot god sunk to rest with vine-leaves in his hair; upon such a stone had it not been in the U.S.S.R. Here is no trampling of the sweet wild thyme to find a couch for love or dreams, no goat-foot treading of the antic hay. . . . There *is* no antic hay; it's all accounted for, in terms of annual output, government percentage, collective profit. According to the Marxist creed hay has no business to be antic; its purpose is strictly utilitarian, and as to gods, thou shalt have none other god but Lenin. . . .

XI

SOTCHI: BLACK SEA RIVIERA

ON the train from Rostov to Sotchi, a Caucasian Riviera resort on the Black Sea, a Caucasian ex-prince become, since the revolution, an engineer in Leningrad, told us, " Caucasians never say ' I love you ', they only say ' I want you '. Love is a Western rationalisation of a natural impulse. In the East you will find no such pretence, nor in the Caucasus."

Being more than a little weary of this eternal discussion of love we turned the subject to something more immediate, our impulse to try to reach Samarkand. When we told him that we had been unable to obtain permits for Turkestan, being English, he said, " Why don't you write to Stalin about it? Some friends of mine once wrote to Stalin for a special privilege they had been unable to obtain in the ordinary way, and he did what they wanted."

Donia was in favour of this idea, until I pointed out that if Stalin said No we should be in an impossible position. It was, I urged, one thing to go to Turkestan without a permit, but quite another going there after Stalin himself had said No. Our present position was that we had not definitely been refused permits; we had simply wearied of waiting for them when there seemed little chance of them being granted; we could, I urged, always take refuge in that remote probability that they might have been granted had we waited long enough. (The last traveller to reach Tibet waited five years for a permit.) . . . We

could claim a degree of innocence in the adventure, whereas to go after Stalin had said No, would be to flout the All-Highest, which was no doubt a deadly sin, and I for one had no wish to fall into the hands of the Gay-Pay-Oo. . . . The possibility of Stalin saying Yes-yes, instead of No-no was highly unlikely, whereas with luck, I urged, we could get right through Turkestan and out the other side, and no one need know till we published the book. . . .

"And how," Donia demanded gloomily, "do you suppose we are ever going to escape the clutches of Intourist? Every place we've been to yet the hotel people have wanted to know where we're going next, and have wired the hotel in the next place. . . . And you know they insist on seeing us off, putting us into the train for the next place. We can't say we're going and then not go! They make it impossible. They jolly well see that we *do* go!"

"We will throw Intourist away at Tiflis," I answered, blandly. "We will tell them at the hotel there that we don't want arrangements made at Baku, because we have friends there."

"It sounds likely, doesn't it, friends at Baku? Besides, according to Voks, after Tiflis we're supposed to turn West for Batum."

"We'll tell them we're going to Batum afterwards."

"It *sounds* all right," Donia grumbled.

"It'll *be* all right," I assured her. "Once we get to Baku we've only got to get aboard a trans-Caspian steamer——"

"We don't know if there is a passenger service. There may be only cargo boats. We don't know how often they go. They may ask for our passports when we go to buy our tickets."

"If you don't mutter to me in English," I said severely, "there's no reason for anyone down there to know we're anything but Russian."

"Our clothes will give us away."

"By the look of things by the time we're through the Caucasus we shall be dirty and shabby enough for that point not to arise."

"You're very optimistic."

"No," I told her, grimly, "only determined."

A little later we both forgot the worries of the adventure that

daily drew nearer in the excitement of realising that we were in the South. The enchanted South of mimosa trees, banana trees, date palms, and brilliant sunlight. We exclaimed at the first glimpse of a mimosa tree in bloom as though we were seeing it for the first time, and it was as exciting as that. One had not, somehow, associated this country of wind-swept steppes and dark fir-forests and grey towns with all this exotic Southern brilliance. One might have been in the South of France, for here were cypresses marching up the hillsides, and orange and lemon trees and eucalyptus trees, and a holiday air at the little wayside stations, with sun-tanned people in white, the men in ducks, the women in sleeveless dresses, and barelegged.

The railway station at Sotchi was gay with a striped awning over a platform buffet, and a trellis of ivy screening off the little tables and the cane chairs, and palms and banana trees in tubs, and splashes of scarlet from those brilliant flowers whose names we could not discover. It might have been the French Riviera . . . but for the patient figures squatting beside their bundles of bedding and baggage.

The ex-Caucasian prince had told us that the hotel at Sotchi was bad, and we were prepared for one more example of pre-revolution Russian bad-taste even in this lovely place. But the hotel turned out to be admirable in every way, was, in fact, the first and last good hotel in all our wanderings. It is a modernly designed white building standing in lovely exotic gardens with white terraces overlooking the Black Sea, which is as brilliantly blue as the Midi at its best. Every room in the hotel has a balcony, and there are wide balconies opening out of the dining-rooms on which one may take all meals. In October it was warm enough to dine there late into the night. Our room was comfortably and artistically furnished, with a very efficient private bathroom adjoining. Our balcony, accessible from French windows at either end of the room, looked through a group of cypresses to the brilliantly blue sea. Beneath our window was a profusion of those scarlet flowers giving out a heavy scent on the still, warm air.

We sank down into the luxurious arm-chairs of our bedroom and looked at each other's travel-grimed faces and laughed a little hysterically.

"I feel," said Donia, "as though I had somehow gone to Heaven."

"I wonder," said I, "what the snag is!"

We discovered it later. In the first relief of being in a room that was neither dark nor hideous we could only think of the joy of hot baths, and of clean light clothes after our dusty tweeds. Travelling with rucksacks doesn't permit of wide scope in one's wardrobe, but from somewhere in the depths of hers Donia fished out a cotton dress, and I a thin jumper and a cloth skirt. Bathed and changed and stockingless we set out for the plage.

It was easy enough to find. We wandered through the cool shadiness of the gardens and came out on to white terraces, which we descended by fine broad flights of white steps, and came down to a promenade above the sea and a shingle beach. This promenade is flanked by huge white sanatoria, as these workers' rest-homes are called, and of which our magnificent hotel was one. Workers come to these holiday homes through their factories, and are given special rates. Very few outside visitors, such as Donia and myself, are taken for the simple reason that they are always filled with workers. Every 'sanatorium' has a resident doctor, and is equipped with X-ray, curative apparatus for rheumatic ailments, gymnasium, and all facilities for special treatments. The visitors are medically examined on arrival, and those suffering from any ailment advised as to their diet and as to treatment which may be had on the premises. Those who are not in need of medical advice use the place merely as a hotel, or rest-home.

It is a pity that all the grand hotels of the French and Italian rivieras and Palm Beach, and all such luxury resorts, cannot be put to such good use, instead of to pampering the idle rich, the nouveau riche, and other parasites and vulgarians.

At the end of the promenade we came to a flight of steps down to the beach, and beyond the beach lies the plage itself. Seeing a number of completely nude male figures we wondered at first if we had come to the wrong place, and were on the point of turning back in some confusion when a few yards further on we saw a group of similarly stark-naked female figures standing and lying about on the sand. There were a few tents erected on the sand for the use of both groups, and a number of basket chairs

S. C. R

A TYPICAL WORKERS' SANATORIUM—OR REST-HOME—
IN THE SOUTH

like shells stood up on end. At the women's end of the plage an astonishing sight met our eyes. It was impossible not to recall Rubens at his revolting worst. It was the complete Rubens 'butcher-shop'. The only naked women I have ever seen as it were en masse before have been in a Paris brothel, where most of them were shapely enough; in all the naked female flesh spread out there in the sun there was not one that was not a positive embarrassment to look on. Never have I seen such vast bosoms; I did not even know that such bosoms could exist; never have I seen such bellies—not even in pre-Hitler Germany at the open-air swimming baths, where, heaven knows, one saw caricatures enough of both sexes; never have I seen such mighty thighs, such spreading hips. No wonder the men bathers a few yards away scarcely ever glanced towards the women. Here was nothing to excite male desire, and everything to encourage the strictest morality.

I felt a little angry about it. It was a wrong done to womanhood that women should be like that, or, being like that, display their unloveliness before men.

"There's no difficulty about cutting a figure on this beach, anyhow," I remarked grimly, as we began to undress.

Now I am well aware that no physical attribute is anything to be proud of; it is something to be pleased about, but since no credit is due to ourselves, to be vain about it is merely foolish; yet I challenge any woman with a good figure to have stripped on that plage without an irresistible pride in her shapeliness. We stripped and ran across the sand into a completely tepid sea. I do not swim, and am always braced for a shudder at the first contact with the water; to my amazement it was like running into a warm bath. I have bathed in the Mediterranean in the summer, but I have never known the Midi warm from the first moment as that sea was. I envied Donia swimming away out into its warm blue. But I lay a long time on the edge of the sand letting the gentle waves wash over my body whose narrowness gave me such pleasure on that plage, though even more than I envied Donia her swim I envied those uncomely Russian women their golden-brown sunburn.

What they needed, we decided, when we had recovered from the first almost angry shock of so much unattractive female

nudity, was the services of a good corsetière, and possibly better attention during child-birth.

(We were much exercised at that time as a result of inquiries as to the use of anæsthetics during child-birth; we were everywhere told that they were not used, nor were they used for abortions. For the latter they were not considered necessary, and for child-birth inadvisable—an astonishingly old-fashioned attitude for so progressive a country as the U.S.S.R. which almost makes a fetish of mother-craft and child-welfare. Some months after my return from Russia, however, I saw in the *Moscow Daily News* that at the Leningrad Province Conference of Obstetricians and Gynæcologists, the question of painless child-birth was being discussed, and that courses were already being instituted to train doctors in the use of the new methods. It is claimed that at a number of institutes in Leningrad methods of painless child-birth have been widely applied and with considerable success, and that in the Obstetric-Gynæcological Institute these methods are being used exclusively. What now of the previous contentions that anæsthetics are inadvisable in child-birth? The fact is that the U.S.S.R. propaganda says whatever is most convenient at the time. As to abortion it has, of course, recently been abolished except on the grounds of health—with the result that already there have been arrests for performing 'illegal operations'.)

On our second day on the Sotchi plage, however, we were more amused than shocked by the balloon-like breasts and buttocks, and Donia made some sketches. Back in Moscow, showing these sketches, along with others, she was accused of 'cruelty' and of caricature, though as a matter of actual fact the more preposterous figures she refrained from drawing, lest the picture be too obscene for the purpose of reproduction in a travel-book.

But leaving the wrong of uncomely things out of it, very beautiful were those golden days at Sotchi, and nowhere in all my wanderings have I known such enchanting sunsets as those over the Black Sea, or more exotic nights. Then the Black Sea became very black indeed; black velvet, against which the plumes of the cypresses, which had been so magnificent against the sunset, were lost, but which gave a crown-jewels collection of stars their

dazzling due, and made rubies and emeralds of the little humble lights of fishing-boats and the quays.

The air was so warm and still in those Black Sea nights that to leave the terraces above the sea and go in out of all was almost sacrilege. There was the pungent scent of the red flowers lying with a heavy sweetness on the air, meeting you in little warm rushes in the gardens, seeping up to you when you leaned on a balcony or rested on a terrace, subtly aphrodisiac, so that you were filled with a nameless sadness and a sweet unrest. . . . But I speak for myself, and well aware that there be barren souls in whom beauty invokes no such sentimental romanticism. And these, the barbarians, will find a cynical amusement in the fact that in this lovely place the night's enchantment was profaned by the very loud wireless which seems to be inevitable throughout the U.S.S.R. today. That was the snag. (In Rostov the night was made hideous and insomniac by a gramophone playing fox-trots in the house across the narrow street which our back-room—taken as a precaution against the noise of trams which characterises the front rooms of hotels in Russian cities—overlooked. When the rigid Marxist code relents a little why in the name of all that is anti-bourgeois must it be in favour of the banalities and vulgarities of American Jazz?) Crowds of rapt listeners sat about on the benches under the trees of the gardens as long as discord lasted—which was past midnight. For those who neither wished to sit outside and listen to the synthetic 'music', nor to go to bed, there was dancing and a kind of billiards; also an indoor relay of the wireless programme. Or you could sit on the restaurant terraces drinking wine, beer, tea.

Meals seemed to go on at all hours. Actually there were set 'services', but we never mastered the hours. So far as we could make out you could lunch at three or five—you were, indeed, not expected to lunch before three—and dine from nine till midnight; but the three to five meal was called dinner, and the nine o'clock onwards one supper. Then there was an immense meal called breakfast, but which began with tea and went on to coffee, and took in salad, salted herrings, garlic sausage, tomatoes, fresh fruit, and a ghastly kind of fruit syrup, as part of its programme.

When we inquired of two girls who sat at our table on the

terrace one breakfast time whether it was usual to take both tea and coffee, they laughed and said that the tea was only to 'wet the mouth', to give one an appetite for what was to follow.

One of these girls was a shock-worker in a textile factory; the other was an engineer. They were bright, intelligent-looking girls, and as well-dressed in their summery dresses as the average English typist on holiday.

The terraces were always crowded at breakfast-time. Afterwards people either went down to the plage, or sat about in the gardens.

The peacefulness of our days at Sotchi was somewhat marred by the extreme bossiness of a guide who not merely spoke the usual fluent English with an American accent, but who wore pert American clothes into the bargain. She was a strutting, cocksure little woman who had evidently made up her mind years ago that all foreign visitors were cases of arrested development and to be treated as such, and never allowed out of sight, or if by any chance they should escape must be soundly scolded for their naughtiness.

We told her firmly, at the outset, that we should not need her services, that one of us spoke Russian, that we were equipped with roubles, and that we were spending a few days here merely in order to rest after a series of night-journeys, and to become refreshed for the more strenuous part of our tour yet to come. And from the outset she had clearly made up her mind to disregard completely anything we might say.

We evaded her successfully for two days, the mornings of which we spent on the plage, and in the afternoons resting on the balcony of our room, but on the third day when she again attacked us we decided to give in and let her show us the Red Army sanatorium which was apparently the show-place of the district, and the sulphur baths, though we could have found our way to both places by 'bus without her escort. On the other hand she might be able to tell us something of interest, we decide, so we might as well let her 'take' us, particularly if she can procure a car to take us in.

We waste the whole of a beautiful morning hanging about the hotel and grounds waiting for her, and when she finally shows up she scolds us roundly, demanding of us where on

earth have we been, she has been looking for us everywhere, and now we shall not be able to go until after dinner—by which she meant luncheon. We inform her with some heat—and feeling like children ' answering back ' to an irate school-teacher —that we have been hanging about all the morning, and after this bicker arrange to meet in the foyer of the hotel at three o'clock.

At a quarter to four we are still waiting for her, and when she arrives she does not apologise. We ask, coldly, " Have you got a car ? " No, she has been unable to get the Intourist car. We must go by taxi. We follow her out of the shady grounds into the hot afternoon sunlight of a shadeless square laid out with flower-beds. There is a blue haze of heat quivering above the flower-beds, and red flowers smoulder, somnolently. There is no taxi in sight, and there are three people waiting. We sit down on a bench and are still sitting there nearly an hour later, during which time no taxi has arrived, and the three people have gone away in despair.

" This," I remark to Donia for the fifteenth time, " is ridiculous ! *Why don't we go by 'bus ?* "

Finally the guide also decides that further waiting is a waste of time, and we march across the square to where a 'bus waits, almost full of passengers. Whilst I clamber aboard to reserve three places, and the guide keeps a look-out for a taxi in case one should suddenly arrive, Donia inquires politely of the woman conductor as to when the 'bus might be expected to start. She receives the brusque answer, ' Presently '. Does that mean, she persists, gently, in ten minutes or in half an hour ? Whereupon the conductor flies into a rage and says that when she says presently she means presently. . . .

Whilst Donia is giving back as good as she got—for there are, thank heaven, times when even the most charming-mannered can be goaded too far—our guide begins haring across the square, waving frantically to an oncoming taxi . . . and at that very moment, without the slightest warning, the 'bus moves off at breakneck speed, hurtling across the square and plunging madly towards the open road.

I bang wildly on the window for the driver to stop, but he merely scowls and accelerates. Donia flings herself on to the step of the 'bus and is precipitated into our midst, and the guide

comes scampering across the square, taking the short cut on to the road, like one pursued by a thousand devils.

She hurls herself on to the 'bus as it swings out into the road, and a moment later crashes down into our laps.

"I couldn't make him stop," I feel constrained to explain.

"He dashed off without the slightest warning," Donia supplements.

The guide turns on us a look of sheer venom and sinks back exhausted into the seat opposite, her little white American-sailor's hat all askew, which makes it look more ridiculous than ever.

But once a guide always a guide. A few minutes later she is sitting up and vociferously calling our attention to the new road along which we are hurtling, and then waving to an immense and magnificent white building on the top of a hill with terraced gardens descending to the road.

"Red Army sanatorium!" she screams at us.

"For officers?" we shout back.

"For all ranks," she bellows.

She says a lot more, but the racket of the 'bus is such that we cannot hear without straining our attention, and we are not sufficiently interested in her ravings for that, and we can see for ourselves how grand it is. The white terraces blaze with scarlet geraniums, and when the garden is a little less new it is obviously going to be quite incredibly lovely.

We descend from the 'bus in a country lane full of the most disgusting smell.

"The drains seem bad about here," I murmur.

The guide glares at us both.

"The sulphur baths," she says scornfully.

She conducts us to a muddy piece of ground where pipes are being laid, wells sunk, pumps erected, and whilst we stand there nearly suffocating in the stench, holds forth to us on the curative properties of these sulphur springs and how people come even from the American middle-west and from South Africa, and the Lena goldfields, for treatment here.

We then march farther up the lane and come to a grim-looking building which has the appearance of a hospital, and which a stream of people are entering and leaving, carrying

towels. It needs no explanation, but once a guide, always a guide. . . .

When we are at last allowed to escape the sulphur zone there is half an hour or more to wait for a 'bus, and whilst the guide is prepared to lean against a tree and just wait, Russian-wise, Donia and I propose a walk.

" We'll come back in half an hour," we say brightly.

But though she turns on us a look of hate, the enemy comes too. . . .

We follow a side-turning which brings us to the railway-line, but whereas the guide is on the point of turning back, Donia and I spot a market in progress on the other side.

We cross the line and enter a small square, round which are ranged stalls which offer for sale the inevitable bruised green apples, dubious-looking tomatoes, grapes, jugs of sour milk. But there is one stall which has something different, and upon which we swoop with glee—a stall displaying corn-on-the-cob piping hot. At one end of the trestle table there is a pail arrangement in which the cobs are being cooked. The woman lifts the lid and permits us to fish out the most likely-looking two. The guide looks on with a bored expression, puffing at her cigarette, waiting, oh, so ostentatiously waiting. . . .

We return to the tree beneath which those waiting for the 'bus still wait. We munch our corn, regretting the lack of melted butter, and that the cobs are not either younger or more thoroughly cooked, but, having acquired them with such enthusiasm, determined to enjoy them. If only to spite the guide. They beat us in the end, however, with their indigestibility, and we fling them to some wandering chickens, then, like children who have finished a game and are at a loose end, begin to grow fretful about the non-arrival of the 'bus. It is already long overdue.

" Perhaps there isn't one," I suggest wildly.

The guide shrugs. " Perhaps."

" Then for heaven's sake let's go by train ! " I cry.

How typically Russian, I reflect bitterly, to be prepared to wait hours for a 'bus that may never come. . . .

We reach the railway-line just as a train comes trundling in —it is that sort of a train ; a local train.

We dash madly over the sleepers and into the ramshackle little station and join a ticket queue, dreading every moment that the train will behave as the 'bus had and race out of the station without the slightest warning.

Actually we sit in the train some twenty minutes before it goes.

The journey back to Sotchi by this train takes nearly three times as long as the 'bus had taken. It chuff-chuff-chuffs placidly along beside an oily-looking grey sea, and stops an inordinately long time at every station.

When we at last get back to Sotchi I feel that if there is no taxi at the station and we have to wait for a 'bus once more, it will be unbearable. There are taxis, but they are all commandeered instantly, not merely those which are there when we arrive, but those which continue to arrive whilst we wait, and there is no sign of a 'bus. It is unbearable.

We cross the station yard and lean disconsolately against the fence of the little garden on the other side. After a few minutes Donia decides that she might as well go away and sketch the station from the platform side, which would take in the striped awning of the buffet, and the banana trees in tubs, and other picturesque items, and the guide and I continue to lean in a depressed silence. Behind us a hefty-looking gardener clips away at a hedge. Whilst I watch the figure advances and I observe to my amazement that the gardener is not a man, but a skirted woman. She wears a man's cap, and a collar and tie. She calls to us and rouses the guide from her gloom.

"What's she saying?" I inquire.

"Oh, she says we're not to lean against the fence."

She shouts back something to the woman, who smiles and returns to her hedge—whereupon the guide promptly resumes her leaning position against the fence, and after a moment I do likewise.

The gardener immediately calls out to us again.

The guide raises her behind from the top bar of the low fence and glares over her shoulder.

"She wants to know if we're having a game with her," she translates, bitterly, and answers back in Russian.

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her that if we wanted a game we wouldn't look to her for it!"

"I wonder if she's a Lesbian," I remark, as we saunter away.

The guide, sunk again into gloom, does not offer any comment.

"*Do* Russian women go in for Lesbianism?" I persist, and it occurs to me as I say it how absurd it sounds, like going in for stamp-collecting, or fretwork.

"I suppose so. I don't know. Look! A taxi!" She goes flying across the road and reaches the taxi just as two men also reach it. There ensues the most ferocious argument which ends in the two men leaping into the taxi and being driven off.

The guide is almost hysterical with rage. She comes back to where I wait, raving that she will report the driver, that it is a disgrace, a scandal, an outrage. We continue to wait and in the meantime Donia emerges from the station and inquires with the mildness of innocence: "Nothing arrived yet?"

This gives the guide a chance to work off some more steam. Whilst she is repeating the story of the outrage, the disgrace, the scandal, the taxi returns and draws up, affably enough, alongside us. The driver smiles good-naturedly, though the guide attacks him with renewed violence.

All the way back to the hotel she continues to scream at him. He occasionally answers, off-handedly, still smiling; his manner is entirely good-humoured through the abuse.

"What does he say about your threat to report him?" I venture to inquire during a lull in the attack.

"He says he doesn't mind."

"What will happen to him?"

"He will be rebuked."

"Is that all?"

"Perhaps more. I don't know." Her voice is irritable; it is clear she is longing to return to the attack. . . .

The driver grins cheerfully to Donia and me as we climb out.

"You naughty little man!"

He laughs and asks Donia to translate. When she does so he laughs hugely and drives away still laughing. Our guide is not amused.

In the foyer she inquires bitterly: "Tomorrow—what would you like to do tomorrow?"

"Nothing!" we almost scream at her in unison. "Nothing at all!"

She turns away in weary disgust, and we retire to our room to rest after what, now that it is all over, seems to have been a singularly exhausting day.

"Tomorrow," I say firmly, as we lie stretched out watching the sunset fade behind the cypresses, "tomorrow we had better be off. We've had a couple of days' rest and done 'the sights'."

"I suppose so. Shall we try to get to Nalchik by 'plane? I'm tired of trains, aren't you, and it's a weary journey—several changes."

I was all in favour of flying everywhere, but sceptical of our being able to do so. At every place we had yet arrived at we had tried to go by air to the next, partly to save time, partly to relieve the tedium of a succession of night-journeys, but always there was either no 'plane, the service suspended during the winter, or it was doubtful whether there would be a 'plane or not, 'owing to bad weather in Moscow.' Not satisfied by the information given us in the hotel regarding the probability of a 'plane to Nalchik the following day, we decided to go to the aerodrome ourselves in the morning and find out at first-hand. Also, we wanted to pay the fare in roubles, which we could not do if we had the hotel people get the tickets for us.

"And perhaps," I suggested hopefully, "if there's no 'plane scheduled, our combined personal charm plus your Russian might induce them to run a machine specially for us. . . ."

In this hopeful spirit we set out next day for the aerodrome. We had seen the flying-field at a distance, looking down the valley of the partly dried-up river-bed which for me gave Sotchi a vague resemblance to Ventimiglia. It is an untidy landscape, with groups of cypresses marching higgledy-piggledy up scrubby hill-sides, a landscape in which the 'composition' is all wrong. In the distance are wooded hills, and beyond the hills a range of dark mountains. It is a landscape which makes you feel that you have to walk miles before your walk will begin to be satisfactory. Its beauty is all potential, a tantalising perpetual promise, like Russia itself.

The flying-field proves to be farther away than it had seemed, watching 'planes flying over the valley and descending there, and the way lies through muddy lanes. We tramp along, chewing peanuts roasted in their shells, having succumbed to the local mania, and one which is every bit as maddening and unsatisfactory and fascinating and irresistible as the chewing of sunflower seeds. The thin dry husk in your mouth is infuriating, and the whole process is irritating and exasperating, but curiously compelling. You go on being irritated, telling yourself it is not worth the trouble, and chewing and spitting and spluttering; you go on till the supply of nuts is finished, which is a relief, though nothing would have stopped you whilst there were any left.

"It induces the contemplative spirit in one," Donia declares, when I complain that since she has taken to nuts I cannot get her to reply to a single question or comment.

"A complete vacuousness, rather," I suggest.

The nuts are finished by the time we arrive at the aerodrome, and we smooth our hair and brush the nut-shells from our clothes, and march boldly across to the low building flanking the edge of the flying-field. The whole place has a very 'buttoned up' look, but by going round the side we find a door, and pushing it open, enter a bare wooden-walled office in which a good-looking young man in uniform sits at a table with some papers before him and an air-route map of the U.S.S.R. pinned to the wall behind.

He rises as we enter and comes round the table to meet us. Donia turns on all the charm and inquires sweetly if it will be possible to fly to Nalchik that afternoon, or tomorrow. . . .

Immediately his face is overcast by that expression of vagueness which the Russian face so easily assumes. Even before Donia has translated, I know that he has said that he doesn't know. That there is no 'plane that day, but that there might be a good 'plane tomorrow, or there might not. . . . There is bad weather in Moscow. The 'plane might not start, which would mean no 'plane arriving here.

"Ask him why a 'plane shouldn't start from here," I urge her.

She flashes long eyelashes on him and says that perhaps it would be possible to run a small machine just for two passengers?

"Perhaps." He doesn't know; he cannot say; perhaps if we ring up tomorrow?

I reflect gloomily, as we walk away, back through the mud, that it is the story of the Turkestan permit all over again. If only they would say No outright and have done with it!

But the Russians are like the Irish in their passion for vagueness, for being non-committal, and in their bland disregard for time. 'Tomorrow'. What would they do without that elastic non-committal word? It is the answer to all criticism of the regime; the way of escape for all who will brook no doubts concerning the direction of the U.S.S.R. Tomorrow, they tell you, inexorably, tomorrow is another day. In Russia it is a solemn thought.

The next day we ask our guide if she will be good enough to make tentative reservations on the night-train, but not to confirm them until we have found out from the airport if there is going to be a 'plane. We go again to the airport, and again there is no 'plane going that day, but perhaps tomorrow. . . . They cannot say.

Returning to the hotel we ask the guide to confirm the train reservations; we will leave that night for Nalchik, wait no longer for the 'planes that don't go.

Immediately she becomes extremely angry. We cannot leave that night. She cannot get tickets for us for tonight at this late hour. Twenty-four hours' notice is needed to get tickets. We had no right to go off to the airport like that. She has herself rung up the airport and ascertained that there are no 'planes.

I feel my heart begin to beat dangerously quickly. The Mannin temper has an Irish violence when roused. My blood is up as it had been in the office of Voks in Moscow. I cannot and will not be dictated to. It drives me crazy. . . .

We point out to her, with creditable mildness, that she had been asked to order tickets for us and told that we would let her know if they were wanted. We want our passports, for we are leaving Sotchi tonight. We say this with an angry firmness and march away realising that we have less than an hour in which to pack, recover our passports, secure a taxi, and get to the station.

In our hearts we have no real faith in boarding a train that night. In all probability all the tickets were sold hours ago, and we can no longer count on the guide to help us. And if she does get tickets for us, we tell ourselves, morbidly, we shall probably never get a taxi, if the other day was anything to go by. . . .

And until you are used to it, the first ten times simply don't count when it comes to repacking a completely dismantled rucksack. Until then we had carefully—almost religiously—avoided unpacking our rucksacks, but at Sotchi the need for lighter clothes, and the sense of relaxation from being in one place for several days, induced us to unpack completely, which meant that in repacking we must start from zero once more in the problem of disposing of our medical supplies, our spirit-stove, our kettle—than which there can be no more awkward piece of baggage.

Succeeding in getting mine packed and strapped first, I run downstairs to see about food for the journey. I find the guide in the foyer. She informs me amiably that everything is all right, that we can go, also that she has a taxi, also parcels of food and bottles of mineral water for our journey, and waves me to a desk where I can recover our passports. She is amiability itself. The scene of half an hour ago might never have occurred. This, too, we discovered, is a Russian characteristic. You may have a flaming row with a person, part with mutual anger and hate, and next time you meet find that your enemy has turned into the most genial friend. . . .

Feverishly I telephone up to our room:

"For God's sake, Donichka, tie a belt, string, anything round the rucksack and come on. There's a taxi at the door——" I am terrified that it might dash away at any moment.

The 'taxi' proves to be an open car, and with our bursting rucksacks, our leather coats, our bundles of food, there is not much room for the three of us—for of course the guide insists on coming, too. It appears, as we hurtle through the heavily scented black velvet darkness, that she hasn't actually got the tickets. Someone from the hotel has gone to the station to get them. . . .

"That means we won't get them," I groan.

In Russia, I reflect, looking up at the eucalyptus trees, you can never safely say you're 'off' until you're actually aboard the train.

Arrived at the station, one of the women officials of the hotel meets us, and immediately on seeing our guide, launches into a long tirade. What it is all about, beyond something to do with our tickets, we never discover, but it goes on and on, even when we sit in the platform buffet waiting for the train. An immensely loud wireless blares forth, and the quarrelling voices of the two women shrilling above it make us both feel quite dazed.

"I'm so tired of rows——"

"I know. But we'll have a nice quiet, peaceful night on the train——"

XII

JOURNEY TO NALCHIK

AN old peasant woman, crying bitterly, thrust away from the steps of the train by a woman guard . . . that was the last we saw of Sotchi.

We were travelling 'soft', but it was pretty grim. The corridors of the train were lit by candles, stuck into what had been oil-lamps. There was a Red Corner in one corridor, with a bronze bust of Lenin, and an array of red flags behind, and on the little table in front—which made the whole thing like an altar—some Communist leaflets. We learned later that the train was known as the Red Train, because all the women working on it, the guards, the ticket-collectors, the attendants were all members of the Young Communist Party, the Konsomols.

We had a grim apartment to ourselves. There was no bedding, and we did not much care for the look of the blankets supplied. Donia consulted with one of the women guards, who said there was no bedding anywhere on the train. Later she came along with some sheets and pillow-slips which she said were wanted for Kiev, but which she had 'commandeered' for us.

We made a meal of the inevitable cold chicken and sour cucumbers and hunks of black bread, then turned in and slept well enough. We arrived in morning sunlight at the little town of Armavir, at which we tried to air-mail some letters home. We had had great difficulty in sending letters by air-mail from the little wooden kiosk of a post-office in Sotchi. Every possible

excuse was made for their non-acceptance. The officials behind the counter were not used to handling foreign mail, knew nothing about air-mail, couldn't read the English writing, were uncertain of the postage, declared that we had left no room for postmarking, had not put our Russian addresses on the outside for return in case of non-delivery, and, generally, just didn't care for the idea of air-mail letters to England. . . .

We had the same difficulty at Armavir. The girl who finally condescended to attend to us in the usual over-heated post-office looked our letters over, back and front, consulted with another official, and finally handed them back to us, saying she couldn't take them. Donia urged her not to be silly, told her the amount of postage to put on, assured her that it would be quite all right, refused to wait for the receipts that were being laboriously written out for us, and we escaped into the good outer air with a sense of wasted effort; we were quite sure that they would never get there. They did, however. Some of them before letters posted at Rostov. Others after letters posted in Nalchik.

Back at the station, wandering about the hot, crowded hall, full of the usual poorly-dressed crowd squatting on or beside its bundles, looking for our porter and smoking cigarettes, we were ordered by a uniformed official either to go outside or to throw away our cigarettes. We went outside and leaned against the wall in the sun for a bit, then went into the buffet in search of glasses of tea. Russian railway-station buffets are monotonously alike; they are all suffocatingly hot, full of india-rubber plants in pots tied up with crinkly paper, and filled from floor to ceiling with the screech of the loudest loud-speaker imaginable. The 'music' of this one was not wireless, but a gramophone with a loud-speaker attached. It was playing American jazz banalities, and people were standing around, close to the machine, listening with rapt expressions. We stood it as long as we could, then at the end of a record Donia went over to the man who appeared to be in charge and suggested that he closed the lid of the machine, as it really was most terribly loud. . . . He was highly indignant at the suggestion. So was the rest of the crowd. It would spoil the tone, they declared, and if the foreigners didn't like it, let them go outside. Nobody *asked* them to come in here where the music was. . . .

THE CAUCASUS

We finished our tea and went into the next room to finish our wait. The atmosphere here was fœtid with humanity. Men, women, and children, sat and lay on every bench, and all over the floor. Women nursed babies, made tea, divided up hunks of bread amongst children; men slept, dozed, stared, spat, carved water-melons, chewed sunflower seeds. The stench at first made you want to retch; then you became accustomed to the atmosphere and ceased to notice it. Whilst I kept a look-out for a porter, Donia made some sketches of 'types' wearing immense sheepskin and astrachan hats.

When at last the train arrived we found ourselves sharing a soft compartment with a pleasant young workman who soon got into conversation with us. He had been a farmer, but was now working in a factory, and was shortly going to an institute for a year to study to become an engineer. Inquiring what was our profession, Donia told him that she was an artist and I 'a well-known English writer'. At this he stared at me in amazement, and then asked Donia: "But why does she wear a handkerchief on her head like a peasant? She will be taken for a working woman!"

Thus does the bourgeois mentality persist in spite of all. . . .

The journey to Prochladnaya, our next changing place, was long and tedious, hour after hour of steppes, flat, grey, unbroken. For hours there was nothing more exciting than a solitary camel, though we noticed with some interest the rows of small 'workers' dwellings' rather like our own council houses, and the blocks of workers' apartments, as we neared railway stations. At one place a row of washing stretched across a narrow street between two rows of little white-washed houses reminded of the back-alleys of England's industrial areas. As we came into another station we saw a game of football in progress on a pitch near some new houses. Somehow one had not thought of football in the steppes. . . .

At Mineralni Vodi—'Mineral Waters'—station we got out and filled out kettle with hot water and made tea and bought some sweet cakes rather like small scones. There is a large buffet and café on this station, gay with palms, and kiosks where face-powder, perfume, lipsticks, cigarettes, are sold. Beyond the buffet there is a raised wooden platform with benches

all round; this was packed, on both benches and floor space, and on the steps leading up to it, by the usual crowd of poor people with their bedding and bundles; some of them sleeping, stretched out full length, others just staring, patiently. They gave the appearance of being prepared to wait indefinitely for trains that might or might not arrive. . . . The men wore sheepskin hats, some of them very shaggy, and either worn leather coats, or black quilted coats, like dressing-gowns; the women were bundled up in black shawls, with handkerchiefs over their heads; the children were wound round with huge scarves as though it were midwinter. All about the station were the inevitable huge photographs of Stalin, Lenin, commissars, famous revolutionaries, all draped in red.

We reached Prochladnaya in the dark, and descended to a platform swarming with ferocious-looking men with sheepskin and astrachan hats bigger than any we had yet seen, and dilapidated quilted coats like very old dressing-gowns, or battered leather coats lined with extremely shaggy sheepskin. Discovering that we had some time to wait for a train, we went along to the buffet intending to pass the time over glasses of tea, but the stench of the thick hot air which assaulted us the moment we opened the door, turned our stomachs so that we all but retched, decided us that the platform with its fresh air was a far, far better place, and we went and sat on our rucksacks along the wall with the usual patiently waiting crowd and its bundles.

We attracted a great deal of attention, though we had believed that by this time, with our grubby old leather coats and grimy faces and cotton handkerchiefs on our heads, there was nothing to distinguish us as foreigners. But it takes a long time to achieve the true Russian degree of shabbiness, and people came and stood in front of us and stared at us as though we were some queer kind of strange animal, which I suppose we were, though it was disconcerting to be forced to realise it in that fashion. Some of the men looked so ferocious that they were positively comic—like boys who had dressed up to make themselves look as wild and fierce as possible.

It was a relief when the local train in which we were to finish the journey to Nalchik came in. It was in darkness, and boarding

it, we found it candle-lit and completely airless. We sat in the buffet car, which was illuminated only by two candles, one at either end, which meant that the coach was so dark that it was impossible to read, and it was barely possible to see the face of the person opposite.

There was a terrific smell of garlic hanging like a fog on the heat, and we took it in turns to go and stand at the door to get fresh air, the one left behind minding our baggage. We left the door of the coach open deliberately, to admit some air, but there were protests, commands to close it, and when we affected not to understand, angry jumpings up to slam it shut 'in a marked manner'. When the guard came round to inspect our tickets we asked if she would open our window, having failed to do so ourselves; she pulled it down a few inches, and immediately an old man in the corner opposite began to protest that the draught was too much, that he was a sick man, that it was different for young and healthy people, that his stomach was bad, and to prove this he clapped his hands to his belly and began to groan. Nobody, including ourselves, took any notice, though when the train started he groaned more loudly than ever, obviously that his moans might be heard above the noise. When still nobody took any notice he placed his bundle on one end of the bench on which he sat, and using it as a pillow stretched himself out full length. When the guard came back she gave him a shove and told him to sit up, it wasn't allowed to lie down in the coach. . . . He sat up, expostulating, and when she had gone dumped his bundle on the floor and got down and lay there, groaning loudly. We decided that if he was neither mad nor drunk, then he was certainly a chronic exhibitionist, for he had been sitting quietly enough until our window was opened. The two hours on that horrible, dark, slow train exhausted us more than the whole of the long journeys across the steppes. We drank glasses of very weak tea, and Donia did a sketch by the light of an electric torch which I held for her. When the tea was consumed and the sketch finished there was nothing for it but to emulate our fellow-travellers and rest our heads on our arms on the table and try to sleep. The train not merely crawled along, stopping an inordinately long time at dark little stations, but stopped

outside stations. By the time we arrived at Nalchik, we had been travelling continuously for twenty-eight hours, but the last two seemed longer than all the rest put together.

Nalchik was not one of the places Voks had scheduled for us. We had decided to go there for several reasons; partly because it offered a more direct route for Ordjonikidze, the starting-point of the Georgian Military Highway, over which we proposed to travel to Tiflis, than the route planned for us; partly to cut out some of the places scheduled and 'get a move on' into the heart of the Caucasus; partly because we had been told that from Nalchik we could get to the little-known German village of Gnädenburg in the steppes, which interested us more than some of the more obvious places, like Mineralni Vodi, which had been arranged for us.

Arrived at Nalchik station we shouldered our rucksacks and struggled out into the yard, where the only conveyance we could see was a contraption like an Irish 'side-car', only much lower; a fierce-looking driver in a shaggy sheepskin hat and a dirty quilted coat sat huddled above his skinny horse. Both horse and man had a hopeless look, as though the possibility of their services being hired was out of the question. We decided to ask him to take us to the best hotel in Nalchik. He looked at us with mild surprise. There was only one hotel, he said; it was some distance away; we could perhaps get a room here. He jerked his whip in the direction of a white house looming up through the trees of a garden. Yearning for a bath, and feeling that we should be more likely to get one in the hotel, we asked him to take us there.

We dumped our rucksacks at the end of the bench along one side of the vehicle, and clung together at the other end. It was necessary to cling, for the seat was very narrow, there was nothing but the rail behind to hold on to, and nowhere to rest one's feet. In this uncomfortable fashion we lolloped-gololloped through the darkness across what appeared to be a succession of stretches of waste-ground flanked by low-built white houses. Presently the waste-ground gave way to immensely wide cobbled streets, in which the horse's hooves made a terrific clatter. The white houses had a queer, lost look about them in the dim light. They were all shuttered; no lights were visible,

and nobody was about. The black velvet sky was thick with very bright stars. I found myself thinking of another small white house, somewhere in another world; a white house at the foot of a huge oak tree; no lights would show from its windows tonight, nor for many nights. . . . People I knew would be going out to dine, riding in tube trains and buses, entering restaurants, standing about at parties; the red buses would be going round Piccadilly. At this very moment someone might be saying: 'I wonder where Ethel and Donia have got to by now' . . . they couldn't possibly visualise us jolting over the cobbles in the unlit dark of a small Caucasian town called Nalchik, being taken anywhere a ferocious-looking driver in a sheepskin hat chose. . . .

It was bitterly cold, and we were intensely hungry and tired. And we seemed to be going a very long way. What was to prevent the barbarian perched up above us driving off to any wild lonely place and robbing, raping or murdering us—or all three? This morbid thought, however, dispersed at the sight of a palatial white building set amidst trees. This, no doubt, was the hotel—if it wasn't a workers' rest-home or a Red Army sanatorium. It looked so very grand that we hastily ran combs through our hair, fishing berets out of our pockets to take the place of the proletarian handkerchiefs which still covered our heads.

The building blazed with lights, and there was an imposing entrance complete with an old, old man in the uniform of a commissionaire.

We clattered through the gardens and the driver jerked his horse to a standstill and clambered down and carried our rucksacks into the lounge for us. The illusion of grandeur vanished on entering. There was the usual heat, and a very bad smell, and india-rubber plants and scraggy chrysanthemums in paper-garnished pots, and the usual picture of Stalin. A number of rough-looking men with sheepskin and astrachan hats sat about on the benches. Our driver dumped our rucksacks; Donia paid him and he went away, and we went into the office to inquire for a room.

An unattractive middle-aged woman sitting at a desk writing, glanced up and regarded us, unsmilingly, without interest.

In Russian Donia asked if we might have a room with two beds, and if possible with a bathroom.

"There are no rooms of any kind. We are full up," the woman snapped, and resumed her writing.

We stared at each other. This was the only hotel in the place; the house in which we 'might' get a room was miles away, down by the station, and we had sent the only vehicle away. . . .

"It's absurd," I burst out. "In this huge place there must be a room—the holiday season is over."

Donia tried again. Was the *tovarich* quite sure there was no room? We had nowhere else to go. . . .

Without looking up from her writing the woman muttered that she had already told us there was no room. . . .

At the sheer insolence of the creature's manner Donia's usually placid temper suddenly spurted up into a great flame of rage.

"Is there anyone here who speaks English?" she demanded.

"What do you want to know for?"

"Because," stormed Donia, "we *are* English!"

At that the woman not merely looked up, but laid aside her pen.

"That," she said amiably, "is different. Why didn't you say?"

I knew before Donia had translated to me what had happened. The sacred word '*Anglichanki*', and the sudden change in the woman's manner needed no translation.

She pressed a bell and a chambermaid appeared.

"I could wring that woman's neck," Donia informed me as we followed the chambermaid down a passage full of the smell of W.C.

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her it was a disgrace and a scandal and that I would write to Stalin about it!"

"Like you threatened the policeman in Leningrad! But I expect she's only acting on orders. They don't want roubles—they want valuta!"

"It's a scandal all the same!"

"But scarcely one you can write to Stalin about!"

"She needn't have been so dam' rude!"

"It seems to be a characteristic of the Russian female official!"

We were shown into a large, bleak, ground-floor room containing two narrow iron bedsteads, a round table covered with a grubby cloth, a couple of chairs, and a wash-basin. The harsh white light of a naked electric bulb added to its bleakness. But we were too tired and hungry to care very much. We mutually agreed that what we wanted was a quick wash, then food.

It was over half an hour before we got a wash. There was no water. Something had gone wrong at the main. There was no water running through any tap in Nalchik. No water to flush the W.C.'s with, no water for baths, no water for wash-basins.

After a good deal of nagging and scolding on our parts the grim woman in the office, and the dour-looking maid, between them persuaded half a jug full of hot water into existence.

We did our best with it, then marched past a row of foully smelling W.C.'s into a large dining-room, in which a very bad jazz band which could not even keep together, made the most execrable noise, to which a few couples danced on a tiny square of space in front of the low dais on which it performed. Although the hour was late, there were a number of people eating, mostly villainous-looking men wearing either the 'regulation' astrachan hat or very large caps in hideous checks or bright green or yellow plush. There was actually one cap in an imitation leopard-skin plush.

Beer was being served in large glass jugs. A number of the men appeared to be a little fuddled with drink, and one was definitely drunk. There were some leering glances in our direction which irritated us in our fatigued state almost as much as the flies which swarmed over everything.

We ordered food which took the usual Russian half-hour to arrive, and which, when it arrived, proved to be quite uneatable, the meat of an incredible toughness, and the potatoes swimming in grease. We sent it back and ordered an omelette, which took half an hour and proved to be nearly as tough as the meat and quite as greasy as the potatoes. In despair, we ordered some

soup. It came in a little less time than the other things, but was half-cold when it came, and greasy. We filled up with hunks of the 'black' bread, and swallowed a little red wine; then feeling slightly sick from so much grease, retired to our bleak room.

We must rest for a few days, we told each other as we dragged off our dusty clothes, for a few days; now that we were here at last, in the Caucasus, in the very heart of the Caucasus, amongst the mountains; and we must find that German village. . . . Yes, and yes, my heart said, but we mustn't stay too long. There's so much yet to do; the weary cross-country journey to Ordjonikidze, the long trail over the Georgian Highway; then Tiflis, and then—and then—Baku, and the Caspian, that perilous sea that guards the gates to Samarkand.

XIII

CAUCASIAN

WE wakened to brilliant sunshine and a magnificent view of distant mountains. Immediately outside our window was a pleasantly laid-out garden, and beyond, across the road, a very fine park with avenues that appeared to run right into the blue heart of the mountains.

Refreshed from our sleep, even the inability to get a bath, and the disgusting condition of the W.C.'s, could not spoil our pleasure in the day, nor the greasy breakfast in the dining-room humming with flies. Before breakfasting we had a long conversation with two Intourist representatives and an interpreter who arrived at the hotel and were anxious to place themselves at our service. The interpreter, who spoke bad English with a marked American accent, was positively put out because one of us had the bad taste to be able to speak Russian, thus rendering his remarkable English unnecessary. The other two men assured Donia in Russian that they had been notified from the Intourist people at Sotchi of our arrival, and had gone to meet us the night before, and could not understand how they had missed us.

Well, naturally they wouldn't be looking for two grubby creatures in old leather coats and with handkerchiefs on their heads, and lugging bundles like any Russian. Foreign visitors arrive wearing hats, smart tweeds, and preceded by porters carrying suit-cases; but it was not worth-while to explain all

this. When they learned that we had chartered a *lineika* and arrived at the hotel in that unceremonious manner, they were horrified. They had had a car in which to convey us as befitted foreign visitors. . . .

They asked us what we wanted to do, and we told them we wanted to go to Gnädenburg. Their faces fell; it was a long way; what they proposed was a nice drive in the mountains, then perhaps tomorrow we would go and see the local Commissar, who would tell us about the town, advise us how best to fill in our time there.

We repeated, firmly, that we wished to go to Gnädenburg. And we should like to go at once. It was a very nice day, the hour was yet young, and what, we demanded, was there against going to Gnädenburg not in the everlasting Russian Tomorrow, but in the here and now of Today?

They looked troubled. Tomorrow was something they understood. You can do anything Tomorrow, for the very good reason that Tomorrow never comes. Tomorrow is so safe. You can promise anything with impunity so long as you promise it for Tomorrow. Tomorrow is a very good title for a book about Russia. Almost any book about Russia. But Today—Today is a troubling, disturbing, exacting time. It means you must get busy then and there. It means you must commit yourself. It means not merely promise, but execution; it is not merely an order, but a tiresome demand for delivery. It is unreasonable, and less than just, to demand anything Today. . . .

Besides, Today was a day of rest. Somehow it was always a day of rest when we arrived anywhere. Tomorrow now——

Tomorrow, I insisted, when Donia showed signs of wavering, Tomorrow is another Day; likewise There's No Time like the Present; also Tomorrow Never Comes. *We are going to Gnädenburg today.* Tell them in English, Russian, German, American—any language you like, only see that they understand that Today has no relation to Tomorrow; that it means at once, *tout suite*, *seichas*, jump to it. . . .

What she told them I do not know, but she said next: "They say there's no car available."

"In the whole of Nalchik?" I demanded scornfully. "Tell them not to be silly."

Perhaps she told them, for they looked if anything still more troubled.

"They say there's a kind of 'bus—a charabanc thing—used for taking parties. But there's something wrong with it. They could be ready in about two hours."

I glanced at the clock. "All right. Tell them to be here with the 'bus, charabanc, lorry, or whatever it is, at half-past ten. Also that when we say half-past ten we mean half-past ten English time, that is, two hours from now, not some time this afternoon."

Whatever way she translated all this, they brightened, they looked relieved, they smiled, saluted, and manifestly promised with all their beings that we should leave for Gnädenburg at half-past ten.

We had, of course, no real faith in leaving at that hour, but when we were still waiting at midday we began to feel that even Russian licence over time was being exceeded. We were wasting the day. We had been told that it was a drive of about five hours to Gnädenburg, so that if we didn't start soon it would be impossible to get there and back the same day. It would be night, now, anyhow, before we got back, and a long drive in the dark. . . .

At about one o'clock a ramshackle-looking charabanc drew up outside the hotel, and a pleasant-looking fair-haired man got out and introduced himself to the two by then thoroughly bad-tempered young women leaning in the sunshine against the white parapet of the terrace.

He was, he said, a Commander in the Red Army, and he had been asked by Intourist to accompany us on this expedition we wished to make. He apologised for the 'car', but repeated what we had already been told, that it was all that was available. He advised us to bring with us whatever we might want for the night, as we should possibly have to spend the night there. He was sorry that he did not speak any language but Russian, and hoped that we would excuse him. He himself had never visited Gnädenburg, and he would be much interested. He was from Moscow, resting in the Caucasus on a year's leave of absence owing to his health. For occupation he managed the Intourist Alpine hotel on the Elberuv and rendered

occasional service to Intourist in this way, and this morning there was no one else, and he was in any case interested and delighted, so if we pleased we could start this minute. . . .

He was charming; he had a quiet, cultured manner, and a sensitive intelligent face. Later he told us that we should not find him very gay. He had lost two fingers in the war and was bitterly conscious of his mutilated hand. Also his health was not good. The war had upset him physically and emotionally. He had seen so many dreadful things, and he could not forget. He could not have been more than about thirty-five at the most. He was going back to Moscow tomorrow to resume his Army life. He was glad. It had been very dull here. But today it would be interesting. . . .

We collected tooth-brushes and washing things from the hotel, then started off. First, said the Commander, it would be necessary to lay in a supply of provisions.

Nalchik by day revealed itself as a dust-heap of a town. It had all the desolation of incompletion. A few years ago it did not exist. No doubt when it is finished it will be a fine modern town. There were already at the time of our visit some imposing municipal buildings, and some well-laid-out avenues lined with acacia trees, and a great deal of building was in evidence. What we saw as a vast open space inches deep in white dust is probably already a handsome square complete with a statue of Lenin. The Park of Rest and Culture opposite the hotel is beautiful with all manner of flowering shrubs and trees, one of the most attractive pieces of gardening we saw in the U.S.S.R. Adjoining it is a sports ground, to which the Young Communists come to drill, with sticks to represent rifles. We watched a group of girls one morning being drilled by a male instructor, whilst a group of boys looked on. Two things are inescapable, all over the U.S.S.R.—pictures of Stalin, and the sight of men, women, and comparative children, marching and drilling.

Nalchik by night proved to have an astonishing amount of 'night-life' considering how small a town it is. We found in the main street numerous cafés in which men and women sat drinking glasses of tea, wine, or beer, and listening to wireless music. In some charming public gardens full of fir-trees we found a bar where a blind man played a concertina. People

promenade up and down the lighted main street, and through the gardens, until late into the night. And there is the hoot of factory syrens calling the night-shifts to their duties. We looked into one factory where at midnight women and girls were machining garments at top speed. That is something else to be observed all over the U.S.S.R.—the feverish working, night and day, shift after shift, the machines never still; non-stop production, bigger production, faster production, all the time, all the time; and now they have the Stakanhov movement, the wheels must fairly scream, and the human soul itself become mechanised, with this maniac frenzy of production.

The main street of Nalchik, animated by night, by day has a sunny Southern cheerfulness. Floppy white felt hats, ducks, and white canvas shoes, are worn by the men, and many of the women go with their heads free of either beret or handkerchief, which renders their appearance less drab than that sombre combination of black shawl and handkerchief, or dark coat and beret, which is almost a uniform for women in the Northern towns. The general impression was still one of poverty, but of a less drab poverty than that of the other towns we had visited.

We bought butter, cheese, cigarettes, bottles of water, sausage, at a fine big food-stores, without having to queue up to do so; at another shop we procured bread, both 'black' and white, then drove off to the market to buy the apples and tomatoes which the Commander also considered necessary as part of our supplies.

Nalchik market is in two sections, one at either side of a road. The larger and main part is devoted to foodstuffs; the other to the sale of clothes—cotton chemises, shirts, petticoats, blouses, machine-knitted wool and artificial silk jumpers, piles of shoes so old that one would have thought not even the poorest person could have had any possible use for them. Incidentally, several times in the Caucasus we saw both men and women walking barefoot, carrying their shoes, whether because they found it more comfortable to go barefoot, or because they were saving the wear on their shoes in order to get a better price for them in the market, or whether merely as an economical measure, we never discovered.

Behind the main part of the market, long-maned, long-tailed horses, as wild-looking as the people, are tethered amongst the parked light carts and traps in which the peasants from the surrounding villages of the steppes have driven in with their produce. One gets the impression of a fair-ground, or of a circus encampment. The market lacks the colour of the Western European market, but it is varied and animated to a degree, and there are some magnificent-looking people. Four old men wearing astrachan hats and long Cossack coats, standing behind stalls on which little heaps of wild apples are piled, look like a Hodler painting come to life. There is in their lined, brown faces all those qualities of suffering, resignation, weariness, wisdom out of bitter experience, which makes Hodler's old men so curiously poignant and unforgettable. You know when you have looked at Hodler's sorrow-haunted, enigmatic faces that you are going to remember them all your life. All that humanity has ever experienced of physical hardship, mental torment, bewilderment, grief, and dread, looks out of those old tired eyes—and from the eyes of these Caucasian old men. In the eyes of the old women there is a different feeling altogether, something a little querulous, and altogether calculating. Squatting cross-legged in the dirt, their wares, from melons to live chickens tied by the legs, spread out in front of them, or standing hand on hips behind their stalls, their voices are shrill and their eyes mercenary. A hard life has made them hard, you feel, not given them wisdom and resignation, and a kind of philosophy, as it has their men.

But some of the young women are very remarkable. Finely built, deep-breasted, and unexpectedly narrow-hipped, superbly straight, with regular features and the most beautifully chiselled mouths, their black hair lying in long plaits over their shoulders, these women have a wild proud beauty usually associated with the true Romany. For the most part the people are fiercely wild-looking, but some of the old men and the young women have this wild yet austere beauty, of suffering in the men, and of a proud spiritedness in the women.

There are a variety of shaggy sheepskin hats, astrachan hats, and a kind of round black fur hat lined with a light-coloured fur which projects from inside the crown and frames the wearer's

face, giving the effect of very bright blonde hair having been pulled out round the face, an effect which is disconcerting in a country of dark people. It is all very 'picturesque', but completely lacking in the colour always indicated in Russian Ballet and Chauve Souris market scenes. The strings of red peppers are almost the only colour note, certainly the only one of any brilliance. The vegetables are meagre in quantity and poor in quality;[1] little heaps of inferior carrots and parsnips are spread out on bits of sacking on the ground in front of the vendor, who squats before them; or they are scooped together on the trestle tables. There are also little heaps of dried apples, fresh damsons, sour cucumbers, pomegranates, strings of onions and garlic; a few bruised green eating apples and battered-looking yellow pears; some coarse-looking tomatoes, more green than red, a few cheeses, earthenware jugs and thick tumblers of sour milk, pieces of meat both cooked and raw, but equally repulsive and swarming with flies; there are also heaps of giblets piled up on scraps of newspaper, cooked chickens as well as live ones, open bottles of wine, a small display of plain cakes, a stall devoted to sweets, and another to painted wooden toys for children. The only article of which there is any profusion is sunflower seeds. There is a sort of kiosk entirely devoted to the sale of meat; the flies hum round it in a black cloud; it is singularly evil-looking meat, and a bad smell comes from it, but it attracts a good deal of attention and custom. There is also a kiosk for the sale of haberdashery —cottons, buttons, braces, and so forth.

We wander about, Donia making sketches which immediately draws a crowd round us. The Commander buys some green apples, and tries to keep the crowds from pressing so closely round Donia that she can hardly draw. I stroll about carrying in my hand the dark blue cotton handkerchief with a border of white stripes which I use to protect my hair from dust in trains and from being blown all over the place when driving, and a woman comes up to me and offers to buy it. It is like a sailor's collar, she says, and would be nice to wear over one's

[1] The bulk of the produce raised on the collective farms is sold to shops and organisations. That sold in the open markets is from the residue allowed to individuals for private use.

shoulders; how much will I take for it? Three roubles? Donia tells her that I don't wish to sell it, but the woman merely thinks the price is not enough, and rises to five roubles. Donia has to tell her, no, not for a hundred roubles before she believes that we quite seriously do not wish to sell. When we cross to the other side of the market I receive another offer. After that I decide that it is easier to wear the dam' thing. But it is useful to know, as Donia points out, that we can always raise a few roubles in this way.

We return to the charabanc of a car to find a swarm of children dancing round it, clambering up the back, jumping on the step; the driver sleeps peacefully at the wheel, oblivious of their shrieks.

We wake him, pack the apples in with the rest of the provisions in the wooden box, then go clattering and rattling and bumping away through the dust. It is going to take us all our time now to make Gnädenburg before sundown. The driver does not even know where it is.

XIV

GNÄDENBURG: GERMANY IN THE STEPPES

THE road out of Nalchik, going towards the steppes and Gnädenburg, is for a long time monotonous and uninteresting. It is bounded on either side by hectares and hectares of maize, which in the autumn is a desolation of stubble with a scattering of a few bedraggled giant sunflowers. Droves of beautiful long-tailed mares graze amongst the stubble. In the Caucasus the mares do not work, but are kept for stud purposes, and the horses used for field and road work are not gelded. Numerous herds of cattle, and flocks of sheep and goats, roam the steppes, in charge of romantic-looking horsemen who wear sheepskin hats and spreading cloaks with very broad shoulders. Very fine and wild these horsemen look riding against the savage sunsets of the steppes. But though there is this movement of men and beasts in the steppes, it does not break a sense of endlessness, of an illimitable grey-green sea flowing away to the edges of the world, and there are endless miles in which nothing moves over that vastness but the shadows of clouds, hour after hour.

It is very easy to get lost in the steppes, for though there are roads, some of them are mere tracks, and there are no landmarks. There is an occasional white-washed *Kolkhoz*, as the collection of cottages and farm-buildings of a collective farm is called. Our driver lost his way several times, and inquired of fierce-looking peasants who did not understand Russian, for the people of the steppes have their own dialects. At the word

'Gnädenburg', however, they waved us on towards the reddening horizon. Some of the men looked so old one felt they must be at least a hundred; and some of the younger women were so beautiful they were almost incredible. In their long, loose-flowing dresses and with their heads covered, they looked like something out of the Old Testament. Beautifully chiselled mouths, fine straight noses, oval faces, wide, dark eyes—I have nowhere seen so pure and classic a beauty. It was difficult to think of these strange, handsome people being rounded up to work on collective farms; they belonged, one felt, to remoteness and solitude and the nomad life, to a romantic lost civilisation of their own.

We clattered through villages consisting of one immensely wide unmade road ankle-deep or more in loose white dust, and flanked by dilapidated-looking wooden houses, some like Swiss chalets, others white-washed and thatched like Irish cabins. Pigs and horses and numerous flocks of geese wandering in the dust, and scattering madly before the Juggernaut of the car, emphasised the Irish note. And, as with Irish villages, one Russian village is monotonously like another—always the wide street inches deep in dust, and the derelict wooden 'chalets' and 'cabins' on either side; and always the high untidy fences piled with thorn at the top to keep out the wolves, which, with the first tang of autumn in the air, begin to prowl in from the steppes after dark in search of chickens, young calves, and lambs.

Dust, desolation, and loneliness unutterable; it became a sort of refrain on that journey across the steppes to Gnädenburg, just as wildness is the refrain of a West of Ireland journey. We paused once, beside a river, for a picnic meal, at a point where a short, low range of hills cuts across the steppes. Our road lay over this range of hills, and our driver calculated that we were about half-way to Gnädenburg. It was pleasant idling beside the river after we had eaten, and we were reluctant to get back into the car, for we were already feeling bruised from hours of continuous bumping over the bad roads of the steppes and the ruts and cobbles and pot-holes of the villages. Leaving the Commander and the driver lying on their backs smoking cigarettes and looking as though they were there for the after-

noon, Donia and I wandered away up the hill-road and coming out at the top, found ourselves on an immense plateau which flowed away to the sky-line. The shouting and jingling of bells which had puzzled and a little scared us as we had climbed up proved to be from teams of horses ploughing under the direction of the usual fierce-looking men in broad-shouldered cloaks and astrachan hats. The view from the top of the hill was terrific —which is the characteristic of all Russian views. That is to say, it spread flatly away in all directions to an immensely remote horizon. Russia, regarded as a view, can be a vast plain, a vast forest, a vast desert, a vast desolation of savage mountains, but whatever aspect it assumes it has one outstanding feature which never varies—its immensity, its seeming endlessness.

The second half of the journey was a repetition of what had gone before—steppes, an occasional *Kolkhoz*, an occasional dusty, dilapidated village, bad roads sometimes petering out altogether, on and on and on, the sun sinking lower, and the daylight imperceptibly fading. . . .

Once we passed a funeral. There was a priest in red robes, carrying a golden cross glinting in the paling sunshine, a shallow coffin strewn with paper flowers, a farm-waggon for a hearse, and what appeared to be the whole village following, men, women, and children, in their faded clothes, straggling along in the dust. The priest's robes and the golden cross struck an almost strident note of richness and of colour in all that desolation of dust and poverty and dilapidation. A little farther on, just outside the straggle of wooden houses which constituted the village, we saw the graveyard—a few crosses growing up like bleak flowers in the untended steppes, not even partitioned off. But there are no boundaries anywhere in the steppes other than the demarcations made by the stretches of ploughed land, and the stretches of maize and vineyard. The steppes are bounded only by the sky, but the life of the people of the steppes is bounded by the steppes. Moscow, whose propagandist voice exhorts them over the radio, is in another world, infinitely far away, somewhere at that forever moving point where the steppes meet the sky. The Communists assert that this is not so; every remote village, they will assure you, has its awakened social consciousness, its awareness of itself as a unit in the great

communal plan. The peasant is politically awakened, feels himself linked with the wider world. It may be true of the younger generation; pumped as full of Communist propaganda as the British schoolchild is of Imperialism, I expect it is. But the steppe is vast and Moscow is far, and you may have a social consciousness, and a political faith which has all the supporting power of religion to the true believer, but when you are five hours or more by road from the nearest railway station, and see a strange face perhaps once in two years, life has scarcely, I submit, that fine free flow which takes isolation and the social and cultural limitations of village life in its stride. Walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage—to those who are outside. Nor to those inside, if the power of self-delusion be strong enough. Religion, whether it be God or Marx or Hitler or anything else, is all a matter of faith, anyhow. The faith of your true Communist is colossal; it is like the faith of the early Christians; it commands your admiration even when you feel that it is rooted in self-delusion. It is very fine if all the simple people in these remote, desolate villages feel themselves an integral part of the colossal machine of the new Russia. It is very fine; it must compensate for a lot; it must be the invisible sun, the pure flame, by which they live. But having seen the villages and the people, and glimpsed their lives, it also seems to me pathetic, too, and a bit ironic, like British workers singing Land of Hope and Glory, and avowing that they never will be slaves. . . .

And now having rubbed both Communists and Imperialists up the wrong way . . . we have left behind some time ago that forlorn burial ground which led to this controversial digression concerning boundaries, and are still jolting and bumping across the great plain of Russia, racing the fading light. . . .

Gnädenburg, when at last we reach it, is like, yet curiously unlike, any other Caucasian village, even to the straggle of geese squatting in the middle of the road, and a flock of sheep trotting in a cloud of dust, and a donkey standing sadly with drooping head and his back towards the sunset. At first glance it is no different from the previous village, yet at the same time there is some subtle difference. After a moment you realise that the difference is that there is nothing dilapidated or derelict about

this village. The houses are better built; some are of bricks, with tiled roofs, and all have trim, neat gardens which have a Teutonic formality about them, with whitened stones bordering the flower-beds, and minute box-hedges. Also there are window-sills with flower-boxes, and porches decorated with trellis up which creepers have been trained. There is none of the Russian squalor and untidiness, and in place of the usual church with gilded spires and onion-shaped domes, there is a severe-looking church with an austere spire, and one solemn bell. The notices outside the church, the school-house, and the offices of the local Soviet, are all in German. Regular services are held in the church, and the Sabbath is observed instead of the sixth-day 'day of rest' of the Communist regime. Russian is taught in the school as a foreign language.

There is a suggestion of comfort and prosperity about this village not to be found in any Russian village, and the people are cleaner and better dressed. It is, in short, a *German* village, miraculously preserving under the Soviets the best features of German village life. But Gnädenburg's claim to distinction is not so much that it is a German colony set down in the heart of the Caucasus, isolated in a sea of steppes, and retaining its own language, customs, and religion after fifty years, its people never intermarrying with the Russians, for there are other German colonies in the Caucasus—there is even a Bulgarian community—preserving a similar purity, but that it has been left quite untouched by the tourist traffic which now invades Russia as one of the show-places of Europe. In the autumn of 1935, when Donia Nachshen and I visited Gnädenburg, we discovered that we were the first foreign visitors for two years, and, apparently, the first Englishwomen ever. Since the visit of an Englishman, Mr. Reginald Bishop, travelling in the U.S.S.R. as a trade-union delegate in 1933, they told us, there had been no one. It was from Reginald Bishop that we first heard of Gnädenburg.

All the younger people in Gnädenburg have been born there; only the elders remember Germany. They had come to Russia fifty years ago from Germany during an economic crisis, hearing of the fertile lands of the Caucasus. They acquired lands and planted vineyards. During the revolution they fought on the

side of the Reds, and though they lost their land, they accepted Soviet citizenship and raised no resistance to collectivisation. They became the fathers of a colony that is still German without ever having set foot in Germany, or feeling any desire to, and which loyally supports the Soviet regime.

The evening we arrived we found a brass band blaring outside the church, and a small crowd gathered round and seated on benches against a fence draped with red bunting and surmounted by the usual huge photograph of Stalin. In the middle of the road, churning up a swirl of dust, a company of men marched some half-dozen abreast, a Red Army officer in command. As we watched they halted in front of the band, which ceased playing, and the officer began to address them. The men, we observed, as we drew close, were all very young—mere lads. We learned later that they were all twenty-two years old, the age when Soviet youth becomes eligible for its two years' military service with the Red Army. We halted the car at the side of the road and sat listening to the officer extolling to the lads the immense advantages of life in the Red Army, the privilege which was theirs of defending the Soviet Union, the workers' State, and so forth. The lads in their peasant clothes stood stiffly to attention, their faces expressionless.

It being already dusk it was obvious that we must pass the night in Gnädenburg, and the driver consulted with one of a group of women standing at the side of the road watching the conscripts. Interest in our arrival had been almost entirely eclipsed by the military performance.

The woman addressed was fair-haired and pleasant-faced; she would be, I supposed, in her middle thirties, though there were tired lines round her mouth and eyes. From beneath her black shawl flowed a full black skirt, and there was the glimpse of a clean, white blouse; girdling her neck was a string of coloured beads—the one touch of holiday in her working attire. She regarded us with interest learning that two of us were English, and was delighted to find that Donia spoke German. There was no difficulty concerning our being provided with accommodation, she declared, and climbing into the back of the car, conducted us without more ado to the house of a friend who had a spare bed. The house faced into a cobbled

courtyard flanked by similar wooden houses, each with a low verandah and a step down to the yard. At the end of the yard was an outdoor oven at which a woman stood stirring something in a huge black saucepan. There was a well, and, beyond, sheds, and a barn. Some chickens wandered about, pecking between the cobbles. The sadness and stillness of sundown lay over everything, and suddenly we were very tired.

The woman whose house it was was away from home, working in the fields, but the young woman who had brought us there assured us that we should be welcome, and lifting a latch showed us into a shiningly clean little parlour full of plants, framed photographs garlanded with artificial flowers, and musical instruments. There were texts on the walls, and rag rugs on the floor, and at the windows spotless muslin curtains looped back with ribbons. There was a plush cloth on the table, and on a sofa cushions in embroidered covers. It was the first of the many interiors we had seen in Russia without a bed in it. It was the first interior in which we had been able to breathe. We were taken to a big kitchen with a red brick floor and provided with an enamel bowl full of water, and a clean towel apiece. When we returned to the parlour the woman of the house had arrived back from the fields and was busy making tea and boiling eggs for us. She was a homely elderly woman with a kind red face and a large white apron. The news of the arrival of foreigners in the village must have spread quickly, for during the meal various other people drifted in, and for them all there were glasses of tea, biscuits, jam, boiled eggs, grapes. There were the usual questions, What were the conditions of the workers in England? What was the Moscow metro like?

Tonight at the school-house there was to be a banquet as a send-off to the conscripts, they told us, and already it was arranged that we should attend as honoured guests. Also it had been arranged that we should be accommodated not in this house after all, where there were many children who might disturb our rest, but in the house of the midwife, who had more room and no children, and she and her husband would be very happy to have us, indeed wanted very much to have that honour. . . .

When we had eaten, there being still some time before the banquet, the woman who had brought us to this house suggested

that we might like to see something of the village before it was quite dark, if it was true that we must return to Nalchik the following day.

The band and the conscripts had gone when we came out into the wide street, and it was filled with horses, a great mass of the wild lovely things, their manes tossing, their eyes dilated with the excitement of stampede, nostrils quivering, a riderless cavalcade plunging homeward from the steppes through a cloud of dust.

Presently the sounds of music came to us from across the road. Dancing had already begun under the trees. Some dancers from the villages round about had come into Gnädenburg for the celebrations, we were told, and tonight we should see some of the real Kabardinian dances.

"There will be some sad hearts in the village tonight," I suggested, "in spite of all this gaiety—mothers and fathers, wives and sweethearts——"

The old people, yes, they would be sad, we were told; they were not infused with the spirit of the new world, the new life; they did not understand what a fine thing it was to be in the glorious Red Army; as for the wives and sweethearts they must put up with it; a boy had no business with a wife, anyhow, till he had finished his military service, and the sweethearts must wait. The wives could go with their husbands if they wished. The lads themselves were happy to go; every lad looked forward to the time when he would be called up, and many young soldiers applied for an extension of service; in the Army they were educated; it was a wonderful opportunity. . . .

I wondered. Was there no individualist in this or any other village who, when his time came to serve, resented the compulsion, felt himself rooted in his native village, had no taste for the controlled and ordered life of the army which was being forced upon him? Was the mind of the youth of the U.S.S.R. all of a piece, as this so enthusiastic young woman would have us believe?

Dutifully gazing as directed at the dynamos of the power-station (noting mechanically, with my photographic mind, that one bore the name of a Leicester firm), at the scaffolding of the village club in course of erection, at the model dairy of the

collective farm, at the tiled and electrically lighted byres, each calf in its own little 'cot', safe from marauding wolves, I was troubled. . . . Conscription is an ugly word, deck it out how you will with fine phrases concerning the honour and the glory, and mass thinking is a dangerous thing, being power for those who control it, and unrealised subjection for the controlled.

It was quite dark by the time we turned in at the gates of the school-house, which was brightly lit, and its porch garlanded with evergreens. Fairy-lights had been fitted up in the spreading beech tree in the yard, and benches ranged along in front of it. Here, presently, the dancing would take place.

The hall of the school-house, in which the banquet was to be held, might have been the drill-hall of an English village arrayed for the Christmas Sunday-school treat. It was lavishly decorated with branches of berries and leaves and with paper garlands. Pink-flowering trees, like tall azaleas, planted in tubs tied up with newspaper, decorated the top table, and it was clear that the entire resources of the village had been commandeered to supply plates, cutlery, glasses for the rows of long tables. It all looked very festive and homely, and as though a lot of trouble had been taken. It was certainly a feast; there were plates piled with home-made cakes, dishes of sweets and fruit, and in each place a plate heaped with a large piece of cold chicken and vegetables.

The two foreigners, so replete from their recent hospitality, shuddered at the sight of so much food, but knew that as honoured guests, seated amongst the commissars and Red Army officers at the top table, there was no help for them.

The secretary of the local Communist Party was in the chair, and at the beginning of the proceedings was presented with a bouquet of chrysanthemums wrapped round with newspaper. Scarcely had the applause at this gesture died away than the honoured guests were presented with a similar bouquet. The conscripts sat at two long tables by themselves. They were shy and silent until the red wine warmed them up, when they began to laugh and chatter, albeit a little self-consciously. The other tables were filled with relatives of the conscripts. All the living elders of the village were there, old, old men with rheumy eyes and the look of death already on them. The grim joke about one foot in the grave seemed suddenly real. They did not talk or

smile, these old men, who were responsible for the existence of Gnädenburg; there was something silent and apart about them. They had lived through so much, through exile, war, bloody revolution, famine; they had seen their sons called up under the Tsars, and now their grandsons under the Soviets; they would be dead and buried in the little churchyard of the steppes long before the Red Army claimed their great-grandsons—if the next world war did not claim them first, or even prohibit their begetting. Old and tired and full of sleep the old men were, I thought, and their middle-aged sons tired, too, from the strain of a hard life; only the young men were fired with enthusiasm for this new world in whose service they were gladly conscripted —the young men who had never known what war was and who knew only the gains of revolution and nothing of the frightful cost. Segregated at the long table, separated from their nearest and dearest, already, before they were in uniform, they belonged to the Army. Mingled with the excitement of the adventure opening up to them, were there pangs of parting sorrow? How much of the sentimental, home-loving German was there hidden away in the Soviet citizen? Was there no heart-ache for departing husbands, lovers, sons, in the bright-eyed patriotic women and girls? Or does Communism train youth to feel to order as well as to think to order? How much repressed hysteria as much as mounting wine was there, I wondered, behind the ready laughter, the bright eyes, the flushed faces.

But whatever sorrow and repressed emotionalism was there, everyone ate heartily, picking their bones, and leaving no scrap on their plates. Glasses of some sticky syrup were served after the chicken. It looked like a wet chocolate blancmange and tasted of nothing much. The jam puffs, scones, cakes, made by the Gnädenburg housewives disappeared rapidly. The men retained their immense sheepskin and astrachan hats, and their hideous caps, throughout the meal. Most of the women wore handkerchiefs over their heads.

Towards the end of the meal the chairman and a Red Army officer made speeches. The chairman referred warmly to the 'dear guests from England' who were with them that night, and went on to speak in ringing tones of the glorious Red Army and the splendid future opening up to the lads of Gnädenburg.

The officer,[1] in turn, pointed out how before the revolution there was weeping over the calling up of the young men, who would, frequently, wound themselves rather than be eligible for the Tsarist Army, whereas now they were proud and happy to go, knowing that the great Red Army was the completion of their education, and proud to be called upon to train to defend the Soviet Union. This was greeted with great applause. (Honesty compels me to add that conversations afterwards with young men who had served their time verified this gladness and pride. The Red Army is a sort of university for the young men, where they study, and acquire technical training of all kinds. Also a consideration is that they live better than at home. The best of the country's food supplies goes to the Red Army.)

After the speeches a little procession of Pioneers, as the children's Communist organisation is called, filed in, and the oldest child, a girl carrying a red flag, recited a patriotic speech, after her shoulders had first been draped in the folds of the flag by the adult in charge. Then the rest of the children, all wearing the red Pioneer handkerchief round their necks, repeated in turn some more patriotic verses—each child much and loudly prompted. All this provoked the applause and exclamations of charmed delight always induced by child-performances the world over; the little ones then marched away, and the feast drew to a close. After the children the first to leave the hall were the conscripts, who marched away in charge of their commanding-officer. This was the signal for the general break-up of the party, and Donia having prettily thanked the rather forbidding-looking Communist leader who appeared to be the host of the occasion, we too escaped out into the yard, whence for some time had come the wheeze of a concertina and the throb of a drum. The dancing had already begun under the beech tree, a large crowd gathered round. As the honoured foreigners we were pushed to the front of the crowd, and Donia promptly began to make a sketch, which, what with being jostled by people craning forward to see the picture take shape, and the movements

[1] Donia insists that this speaker was not an officer but the civilian father of one of the conscripts. According to my notes made shortly after the event the speech was made by a Red Army officer, and my memory endorses this, but I may be wrong. E. M.

of the crowd generally, and the inadequate light, was no easy matter. The dancers wore national costume, that is to say, full skirts and shawls for the women, and the men top-boots, breeches, long coats, astrachan hats, and ornamental swords. The dances are performed in pairs, the man stamping threateningly round his partner, who merely shuffles about in time to the music, holding her hands above her head, in a Spanish gesture, or resting them on her hips. Every now and then the man lunges forward at his partner and hisses at her. Each dance continues until the man thinks fit to end it—or until the woman stops from sheer fatigue. The onlookers mark the time by clapping their hands to the rhythm of the music. The tempo of the dance is vigorous to the point of violence, and the couples win a degree of applause according to the amount of energy displayed by the man. Apparently nothing more is required of the woman than that she shall just shuffle around to be jumped at, hissed at, circled round, a point of focus as it were for the male gymnastics.

After three or four couples we found the performance tedious in its monotony, and the length to which every exhibition was spun out, and we moved away to the rival group gathered round a space in which couples, both Russian and German, stumbled heavily and clumsily through polkas, valetas, fox-trots, according to the tunes ground out by a gramophone with a loud-speaker apparatus attached. Occasionally a concertina replaced the gramophone. It was not of much interest, but everyone was determined that the foreigners should miss nothing, and we were thrust forward, and people made way for us, only to be surprised and disappointed to discover that Donia did not propose to make a sketch of this. A young Red Army officer asked her if she would draw him; she pleaded that the light was too bad, as indeed it was, and we made our escape from the dancing before our popularity became too much for us.

The wide road was filled now with a black velvet moonless dark, and the sky was a blaze of stars whose thickly massed brilliance seemed very close to the earth. There was a feeling of the steppes flowing like a black sea right up to the bounds of the village, laving it, and reaching away to the horizon. Going beyond the village would be like stepping off into space; one

would be engulfed by the infinity of the steppes. Out there in that vast darkness there was nothing but an occasional wolf prowling secretly down upon a village, drawn there by a winking light, like the forlorn light of a ship moving solitary through an empty sea. Eternity, you felt, lay out there in that darkness, with its Never and Forever, the two words it is better not to use. . . .

I shuddered, and was glad of village lights, and happy talk of trivial things.

A young collective farm-worker who had drifted in during the meal at the first house to which we had been taken, took us down the village street to one of the charming little houses which lined it on either side. The master of the house, the midwife's husband, had not been born in Gnädenburg, he told us, but had come there after the war. He had a curious history; a German, fighting in Russia, he had been taken prisoner by the Russians; released during the 1917 revolution he preferred to stay in Russia rather than return to Germany, and hearing of this German colony migrated here. He preferred the freedom of life in the new Russia, he himself told us. Homesick for the Fatherland? He smiled a queer, far-away smile, and repeated that he preferred Russia; his home was here, with his dear wife, who had been born in Gnädenburg. He was a man of obvious education and intelligence. He might have been a schoolmaster, one felt. Here he was in charge of the village stores. As a personality he eluded me. I felt that I had no idea what he was thinking or feeling. He had a dried-up look about him, and his manner was nervous, abrupt, yet there was warmth there, like a fire out of sight. What, I could not help wondering, was the real reason why he had chosen to remain in Russia—the revolution-racked Russia of 1917, and during the ravaged, famine-stricken years that followed, instead of returning to his own country, his own people? Germany was also to be ravaged by revolution, but he could not know that then, and there was a family awaiting the return of the released prisoner-of-war. . . . But we were his guests, and he our most kindly host, and it is neither meet nor wise to attempt to probe a fellow-creature's reticences.

Our hostess was a simple, kindly soul who mothered us both, bringing us hot wine in bed, insisting on my wearing one of her bed-jackets because I had a cold, fastening me up at the neck

with a safety-pin in her eagerness that I should keep warm, bringing us hot-water bottles, calling us her *Kinder*—she had, she said, ruefully, none of her own—I began to think it would be pleasant to stay there and have a baby and be confined by her, and learn German properly. . . . When we told her this she clasped our hands and assured us earnestly that nothing would please her better than that we should stay, whether we had babies or not. . . .

The little house was spotlessly clean, and homely with good solid German comfort. There was a pleasant entrance-hall, with a grandfather clock, some shining brass, an umbrella-stand, a hat-rack, polished floor, rugs; a sitting-room with little tables cluttered with knick-knacks, a pedestal supporting a plant, an upright piano, a sofa with stiff cushions, rocking-chairs, plush arm-chairs, foot-stools, numerous water-colours done by the master of the house, numerous family photographs in fretwork frames and wreathed with white paper roses, artificial flowers and dried grasses in 'ornamental' vases—in short all the Lares and Penates of the old-fashioned bourgeois German home. There was a dining-room, a large kitchen, two bedrooms, the latter with numerous framed texts on the walls. We were given a room in which two single beds were placed end to end, and not for weeks had we known such restful sleep as in those warmed, soft beds . . . we seemed to have been asleep only a few minutes before we were wakened by the shutters being opened from outside, letting in a flood of bright daylight.

There was a sound of cocks crowing, and a distant bleat of sheep. We got out of bed and flung wide the windows and smelled good farm-yard smells, and the morning air had the taste of the countryside on it. Whilst we were thus greeting the day, the *Gnädige-Frau* entered with hot-water, and exclaimed with dismay at the open windows. She put down the hot-water and rushed to close them as though shutting out some dire evil before it was too late. Only the mad English, it seems, have any taste for fresh air. We reopened the windows when we left the room in order, as we thought, to air it, but when we returned to it after breakfast they had been closed again.

The dining-room was very hot, heated by a tall tiled stove, but as I was coughing, the *Gnädige-Frau* insisted on draping my

shoulders with a woollen shawl. The young man who had brought us to the house the night before was there, also another young man, and the Commander, who had been accommodated in another house. We inquired about the chauffeur, but were told, Oh, he was being looked after. Whilst we sat at the table there was a sudden commotion in the street on to which the room looked, and a great drove of horses went thundering past the window, manes and tails flying, a wild stampede in a cloud of dust. . . .

"The mares going to the steppes," the new young man explained, and there was some amusement over our startled interest. Did we not know that the Caucasus was famous for its horses? The mares did no work; they went every morning to the steppes, returning at sundown. . . . It was nothing. But would we tell them, please, what were the conditions of the working-classes in England. . . .

It was a prodigious, a fantastic breakfast. It began with red wine, went on to white wine, and only at the very end was there coffee. With the carafe of red wine we ate boiled eggs—a great dish of which was placed in the centre of the table, and we helped ourselves to them as though they had been apples. We found ourselves expected to eat at least three each. With the boiled eggs we ate home-made scones and butter. After this came a carafe of white wine, and round sweet cakes upon which we were expected to spread honey. Then was served a dish of doughnuts warm from the oven, and after this a dish of thin pancakes to be eaten with syrup. When not even to oblige our host and hostess could we eat a mouthful more, large cups of coffee were served, and a huge bowl of white grapes from the Gnädenburg vineyards placed on the table. When we asked whether this was the usual breakfast, or a special-occasion one in our honour, our host and hostess looked bewildered. Did they, we amplified, normally have wine for breakfast, both white wine and red wine? But yes, they said, why not; did we not have wine for breakfast in England? No? Wine, we explained, was expensive in England; a luxury; but even so it would not occur to us to have it for breakfast, nor had we had it offered us elsewhere in Russia at that meal, even in the Caucasus. *So!* They were much interested. Here it was the custom. And

was it not a good one? We laughed and said that if one was not going to work wine for breakfast was very pleasant, but that personally if we were going to do a day's work we should prefer to drink only tea or coffee; one did not feel like work after drinking wine—particularly first thing in the morning. This amused our host very much. Wine was a good thing, he declared, a very good thing, and should be drunk at all hours of the day; wine was the soul of life, and waving his glass aloft he called to his good wife to bring yet another carafe. . . . She came back with a *demi-carafe*. He had had enough already, she declared, firmly.

We must have sat for at least two hours over that breakfast, and when at last we rose to go our host and hostess beseeched us—need we go? Should we not stay another day, another night, at least?

Donia looked at me. "It does seem a pity to go without properly seeing the village," she suggested.

I was full of a dream of wild, beautiful horses galloping at sundown and early morning in a cloud of dust, and of this village of the steppes as a lost place, out of the world, remote from reality, and I knew even then that this quality of strangeness and unreality which held it like a trance would stir always at mention of its name, as long as memory lasted, but there was this dream of Samarkand, and those who take that golden road 'gnaw the nail of hurry' and cannot stay their caravan for any dim-moon city of delight. . . .

"We'll see the rest of it this morning," I said, unrelentingly.

It seemed that we must be shown the vineyards, and the whole breakfast party bundled into the Juggernaut of a car, and children ran to the garden gates, and women stopped shaking their mats and dusters, and herdsmen reined in their horses, to see us go by—for now there was no brass military band or marching conscripts to detract from our triumphal progress.

In a veritable storm of dust raised by our passage we swung out of the village and up a hill and came out on to the crest, where the vineyards lay golden in the mellow sunlight of an October morning. We got out of the car and walked a little, and below us lay Gnädenburg, neat white houses, red roofs, church spire, golden trees, toy-like, peaceful, and beyond and

all round, like a sea, the grey-green steppes. There were curls of smoke, and a dog barking, and a cock crowing, and this movement, these sounds, were part of the stillness and peace, and mournful beyond words. Very clear the dog-bark and the cock-crow were in that silence, thin and clear, yet somehow remote, belonging to another world—forlorn lost cries like a ship's siren in the night. For a little while we had belonged to the life of that peaceful village down there, been part of its laughter, its social life, eaten and slept there, been gathered to its warm kindly heart; in a few moments we should say farewell to these simple kindly people who had taken us in, complete strangers, without thought of reward—proudly refusing even to consider it—and it was unlikely we should ever meet again. The brief contact was over. This inescapable never-forever melancholy of the steppes!

We said Good-bye up there in the vineyards, and it was as though we were parting with old and dear friends. There were tears in the eyes of the little *Gnädige-Frau* whose *Kinder* we had been for a little while, and a kind of hunger in the eyes of them all as they clasped our hands; we had come to them out of another world, and in a moment we should vanish back into it in a cloud of dust.

"Come back one day," they said, and '*Aufwiedersehn*', they cried to us, '*Aufwiedersehn*', and '*Aufwiedersehn*' we answered, though we knew that even in that moment Gnädenburg was beginning to fade into a dream within a dream . . . a dream of little red-roofed houses set amidst golden trees, of men and horses and cattle moving in a cloud of dust, of herds of lovely Caucasian mares, long tails and wild manes flying, of voices crying in mellow morning sunlight, '*Aufwiedersehn*', and the long blue shadows of clouds moving in an unanswering silence over the imprisoning steppes.

XV

JOURNEY TO THE MOUNTAINS

I CONFESS I made the journey to the mountains unwillingly. Those who gnaw the nail of hurry make bad travelling companions. Mountains, I felt, and declared, I could see anywhere, any time. I had seen the Swiss Alps, the Alpes Maritimes, the Apennines, the Andironacks, the English mountains, the Scottish mountains, the little mountains of Ireland, the big mountains of the Tyrol, the fierce mountains of Spain, and I could not feel that there would be anything essentially different about the mountains of the Caucasus and was quite content to see them at a distance.

But, "You can't go to the Caucasus and not go to the mountains," Donia urged.

"I went to Vienna and didn't go to the opera," I informed her. "I lived in Paris without going up the Eiffel Tower. I went to New York——"

"This is different. People always say that for lack of a better argument."

She had a scheme by which we went to a mountain place and stayed the night. In the end we compromised on merely making a day's journey.

The Commander breakfasted with us. We told him of the excursion we planned, and that this time instead of the Juggernaut we had been promised an old Ford car. We would picnic in the mountains, we told him, then tomorrow we would leave for Ordjonikidze.

He was, alas, going back to Moscow by that night's train, he said, or else nothing would have given him greater pleasure than to have accompanied us on our excursion. We said that we too should have liked that. After breakfast we shook hands, expressed the hope that we should meet in Moscow some weeks later, and having exchanged addresses prepared to forget him for the time being.

When the shabby old Ford drove up to the hotel only half an hour later than we had ordered it, the Commander was seated inside. He had cancelled his ticket for that night and was coming with us!

"But your wife," we protested, "won't she be disappointed?"

He shrugged. "When one has been away a whole year another twenty-four hours makes no difference!"

There was no need for more provisions, we had enough left from the Gnädenburg trip; we stopped only to buy fresh bread, then followed the dusty arid road out of Nalchik, headed this time not for the steppes but for the mountains.

For some time the road was bounded on either side by hectares and hectares of maize stubble, amongst which droves of mares and foals grazed. Then abruptly we turned off the main road and took a sort of cart-track which brought us almost immediately to golden woods, cliff edges above a river, and the grassy lower slopes of the mountains. After days of the monotonous flatness and unchangingness of the steppes this broken country was a great joy to us, and we felt compelled to stop the car and plunge into the woods, scrambling to the cliff's edge to enjoy the lovely uneven lines of wooded slopes, valley, mountains. Continuing the journey we were several times obliged to draw into the side of the road to enable long caravans of oxen-drawn light carts made of basket and laden with corn-cobs to pass us. A great deal of the maize grown all over the agricultural Kabardinia district is sent to Balkaria, which is primarily devoted to cattle and horse-raising and as such its lands almost entirely given over to pasturage. The drivers of these flimsy-looking waggons lay on top of the high-piled corn-cobs, for the most part leaving the bullocks to amble along as they willed; occasionally they called to them with a peculiar cry like that of Spanish muleteers. There is something altogether Spanish about many of these Caucasian mountain people, in their swarthy good looks, a sort of gay

insolence of manner, and a certain indolence. They have regular features, very fine black eyes, and magnificent teeth. Our crawl past this bullock caravan was a sort of triumphal progress of flashing amorous smiles. . . . They were the first attractive people we had seen for weeks.

In the villages through which we passed the children gave us the young Pioneer's 'Be prepared' salute, and many of them wore the red neckerchief. The women were as attractive as the men, handsome, proud-looking creatures, and decorative in their bright shawls. The Spanish note was reiterated in the number of donkeys burdened with huge panniers climbing up through the dust of the mountain road to the villages. The houses of the villages were mainly white-washed hovels rather like Irish cabins, and with mud-chimneys, but trim new houses of the bungalow type were going up everywhere. Our curiosity concerning the interiors of the primitively designed old houses caused us to call at one house and ask for a drink of water. An old woman sat on the ground outside the hovel; she wore red ankle-length trousers, but at our approach she rose and let down a black skirt pinned up round her waist, and hobbled away into the dark interior. We followed her in, and Donia asked her for water. She did not understand Russian, and offered us a bowl of milk. The Commander then tried out a few words of dialect, and she went over to a copper which we dimly discerned through the gloom, and dipped an enamel mug into it. We drank in turn, at leisure, giving ourselves time to become accustomed to the darkness of the cabin and take in its details. The water was icy cold and tasted vaguely peaty. The old woman stood by the porch, eyeing us suspiciously. She was very old, and she did not speak a word to us, nor attempt to understand any of the remarks addressed to her. Quite clearly she was not interested in us and wanted us to be gone.

But we took our time, ekeing out the mug of water.

When our eyes accustomed themselves to the darkness after the bright sunlight outside, we saw that the only furniture of the place consisted of two narrow iron bedsteads placed end to end along one wall. They were heaped with nondescript rugs and coloured rags. A primitive fireplace occupied most of the opposite wall. Huge logs lay burning on the ground, under the

wide, short mud chimney up which one looked to the sky. There was a vat of milk in the corner by the door. There was no window, and the floor was the naked earth. Flies swarmed over the rags on the beds, and over the vat of milk. There was a three-legged wooden stool such as one sees in Irish cabins in front of the fire. The place was very hot and airless and had an evil smell.

Children and a few chickens scampered about in the arid patch of ground outside. There were a few cabbage stumps and an apple tree beyond a broken fence. Two young women sat on the ground in the shadow of a white-washed wall weaving. The old woman went back to her washing. The Commander laughed when we expressed our dismay at such living conditions. In the wilder parts of the mountains, he said, the houses didn't even look like human habitations; these hovels at least *looked* like houses. But in time they would all be abolished. Building was going on everywhere. It was true. But such hovels are the reason why it is so very easy to write anti-Soviet; the 'lies about Russia' are already there, ready to hand; you have only to describe such a hovel as this and omit to mention the new white-washed bungalow in course of erection across the road. The lies about Russia are not the things said, but the lying implication of what is left unsaid. It is all too easy to tell only half-truths about things seen in Russia. This hovel—one of many—is true, for example, but the rest of the truth is the building of the little new houses going on in the villages in which these hovels are the remains of the old Russia.

After journeying for some time through wild rocky scenery, we left the car on the road and climbed up steep grass-slopes to find a good picnicking place. We asked the Commander if it would be all right to go out of sight of the car, like this, but he assured us that the people were very honest. Not long ago a wallet full of notes had been picked up in one of the valleys by a shepherd; he took it to the police and it found its way back to its owner. The honesty of the people in the Kabardinia-Balkaria district, he said, was well known.

We were by then in the Balkaria region, and droves of horses were grazing on the slopes below us. There were no trees, nothing but the steep grass slopes, and wastes of rock and

boulder. We were very high up, and the snow-tipped summits of the peaks seemed very close. We had passed through wild rocky gorges to get here, dark caverns into which plunged immense waterfalls; the graciousness of golden woods and babbling river seemed far away. A great wind came over the peaks and whitened the grass. . . . The sunshine was fierce and dry, as it is in high places.

I lay on my back a little apart from my feasting companions; the smell of the garlic sausage they were eating with such gusto nauseated me; I felt sick and exhausted. I lay there resisting the idea that I felt ill. I simply couldn't be ill. There was so much ground still to cover, and the difficult part of the journey had not yet begun.

A horseman galloped behind us the greater part of the way back, a handsome creature with a flowing cloak and an astrachan hat, bold eyes, and, when he smiled, superb teeth. And how he rode! Not even at the Dublin Horse Show have I seen finer horsemanship. The Caucasian peasant rides from the time he is a small child; it is as natural to him as breathing. In the Caucasus you will see young children riding bareback on the wildest-looking horses with the utmost self-assurance. The rider who galloped behind us across the mountain wastes and through savage gorges gave an impression of being one with his horse, which was a joy to behold; here, you felt, was all that was meant by the poetry of motion, the song of rhythm; here in this effortless power of man and horse was the essence of the Lawrencian conception of male virility. Where a track broke away from the main road to follow a stony course beside the river, he left us, with a farewell flourish of his whip and a final flash of brilliant teeth. . . .

Down by the river, facing the lowering sun, a robed figure stood salaaming.

A solitary Muslim at his sunset prayers, a lone sentinel on the frontier of the East. . . .

'Beyond that last blue mountain barred with snow, across that angry or that glimmering sea'—lay that dim-moon city of delight called Samarkand.

Tomorrow, I knew, we should take to the iron road again, going Eastward, always East. . . .

XVI

ORDJONIKIDZE: TRAVELLING 'HARD'

IN the morning we left for Ordjonikidze, the starting-point of the Georgian Military Highway which goes over the mountains to Tiflis. The Commander came to see us off, and we parted with him with real regret. We had all three dined together when we got back from the mountains. We drank wine and talked, of course, of Love. We were grateful to him that at least he spared us What are the conditions of the workers in England. Full of wine, and talking still of Love, we had walked out into the starry darkness, and sat under fir trees and listened to distant music from a café whose lights glimmered between the tree-trunks, and to the laughter of others who sat or walked beneath the trees, and to the sirens calling factory-workers to their night-shifts, and there was a kind of sentimental, pleasant melancholy about it all, like the forest scene in *The Cherry Orchard* when they all sit about and talk about their souls, and he clasped our hands in turn, so that it was all a little ridiculous as well as vaguely sad, and more like something out of Chekhov than ever. . . .

There is no queueing up for tickets at Nalchik for Prochladnaya, to which we must return for the cross-country journey we are now making. There is no difficulty about getting tickets for local trains such as this, on which all the coaches are 'hard'—that is to say almost unbelievably hot, evil-smelling, uncomfortable, painted in khaki-coloured paint, unrelieved by even an advertisement, so that they are like cattle-trucks, except

that cattle-trucks haven't the foul smell of unwashed, garlic-chewing human beings.

The train is full of peasants who drop off at various points along the line. Donia amuses herself making a few sketches. This is the train in which we had made the exhausting two-hour candle-lit journey from Prochladnaya to Nalchik. The view from the window by daylight proves to be flat and uninteresting, a desolation of steppes, with mountains receding in the distance.

At Prochladnaya, with nearly two hours to wait, we leave our rucksacks in the baggage-room and wander out into the dusty little village. We follow an immensely wide street, past shacks of shops—a bread-shop, a meat-shop, buzzing with flies, a shop which sells highly coloured sweets and bruised green apples—past the usual little shabby wooden houses, till the village trails away into wasteland, with fields and a river beyond.

We walk beside the river until the fields peter out into a marsh, over which there is an unsafe-looking bridge. We are about to venture over this when an old man sitting in a ditch calls out to us. We turn and Donia asks him what he says. He has a beard and wears a peaked cap like a chauffeur's, a faded blue overall held in by a leather belt at the waist, and top-boots.

"He says we can't go over the bridge—that it's not safe," Donia translates, when the old man has repeated his words.

I point out that a man and woman have just crossed it.

"Let's go, then. He seems a bit mad, anyhow."

He watches us with interest during this conversation, then addresses us again, smiling.

"He wants to know what nationality we are."

When he is told he pats the grass beside him, excitedly, insisting that we sit down by him and tell him all about it.

We have nothing else to do, and might as well pass the time in this way as in any other, so we sit down beside him in the ditch, and he tells us that he has had a good bit to drink, but that he hopes it will be all right, and asks us what the Moscow Metro is like. We in turn inquire of him how he likes living under the Soviet regime. It is all right, he says, the Tsars were no good, but Stalin is all right; only the Commissars are too bossy. That's the trouble, the Commissars are too bossy. . . . We ask him if he works, and he says Yes, on a collective farm; so, also,

does his wife. She, also, is too bossy. She is his second wife; his first is dead. It's all right working on the collective; he has plenty to eat and drink. . . . The hiccup which accompanies the statement testifies to the latter, anyhow. He has a huge hunk of black bread sticking out of a pocket of his overall. He wants to know where we are going, and how we have got here. When Donia tells him he declares at once that we must come and see his cabbages; away over there. . . . He waves vaguely to the background. We gaze in the direction indicated, but no houses are visible; there appears to be nothing but indefinite waste-ground full of weeds and rushes. . . . Donia says hurriedly that we are afraid we have no time to come and see his cabbages, great as the pleasure would have been to have done so. . . .

He staggers to his feet at that and stands looking down at us, rocking perilously.

"You have come all the way from England!" he cries, "you have been all over Russia, but you haven't seen my cabbages!" He waves his arms, rhetorically, and nearly over-balances. We spring up and support him.

"Tell him to be careful," I urge Donia, propping him up on my side, then address him in English, "Now, Dad, you naughty old man," I say severely, "we can't stand here propping you up all day!"

He does not, of course, understand a word, but he looks at me and laughs hugely, and thereafter, as he steers a zig-zag course across the wasteland, Donia supporting him on one side and I on the other, he and I have one of those fantastic conversations in which it is quite unnecessary to understand a word that is spoken. When he addresses me I laugh and nod, vehemently, or nudge him in the ribs, knowingly, looking surprised, impressed, or sly, at everything he says, according to the tone of his voice, and in accordance with his own expression, make clicking noises with my tongue, as who should say, Too bad, too bad, or double up with laughter, or return his sly grins, as though we share some great secret, and in this expressionist fashion we have a grand conversation and understand each other perfectly, though we have not the slightest idea what the other is talking about. . . .

We have a vague idea of seeing him safely to his home, since

he is so very drunk and so much in need of physical support, but the way is very long, and the path very rough, and when after some time still no houses are visible, the joke begins to wear thin.

" He's calling me his Little Dove," Donia protests, " and he's getting on my nerves. I suggest we abandon him. We can't wander about the countryside propping up a drunken old peasant like this ! "

I offer the counter-protest that it would be interesting to see where he lives, and to inspect his cabbages.

At that, as though he has understood, he releases his hold on us both in order to give me a playful You-are-a-one-dab, and we grab him just in time to prevent him toppling over. He lurches against Donia, who gives him a push which gets him on to his feet again, and there he stands swaying between the two of us, grinning and shaking his head, entreating us, his pair of little doves, to come and see his cabbages. . . . It is all mixed up with a long and involved story about two sons of his who were killed in the war, and which, Donia says, he has recounted several times already.

She speaks sharply to him, and tells him that we have a train to catch.

He regards her, amiably, smiling, swaying, rocking back on to his heels and forward on to his toes, and says something which sounds like a plea to her not to be angry.

" What does he say ? " I inquire.

" Little Dove ! " she snaps.

I burst out laughing, and he looks at me and grins, knowingly.

" Come on, you old devil, I'm through with you too," I tell him.

Gripping him firmly by the arms we march him back to where we had found him.

At the ditch we halt, and Donia informs him firmly that we must leave him now and go to our train. She speaks so firmly that I do not need to know the words to understand clearly the gist of her remarks. I cannot help feeling a little sorry for the old rascal.

He stands looking from one to the other of us, and his expression and his gesture translate his reproach, " And you've never seen my cabbages ! "

Donia damns his cabbages, and in the firm tone in which she had told him about the train, bids him *Dosvedanye*, and holds out her hand.

He shakes hands with us both, very solemnly, calling us *Tovarich* and Little Dove, declaring that he is honoured to have met us, but is sorry we have not seen his cabbages. And if we can spare him another cigarette he will be obliged. . . .

We give him two or three, then struggle with him to get one alight. Every time the match goes out he laughs with childish pleasure, rocking back on his heels and nearly toppling over, and digging us in the ribs and slapping us on the shoulder, as though it were all the wildest fun.

When at last we succeed in keeping the flame alight for a moment what must he do but drop the cigarette.

Finally we leave him with the matches, and the last we see of him is sitting in the ditch striking matches which go out immediately between wild farewell waves in approximately our direction.

Still with time to spare we watch a class of girls in the yard of a school near the station being drilled by a youth, and decide that we have never seen a sloppier exhibition of physical jerks anywhere. There is not one girl bringing any muscle work to it. It is all completely lifeless. In the middle of it one girl takes the comb from the back of her head and proceeds to comb her hair.

The ' hard ' journey to Beslan, our next changing place, is slow and hot and uncomfortable, and the smell is frightful. Russian ' hard ' coaches are not divided off into separate compartments, and above the seats are two tiers of shelves. If you are unlucky enough to be allotted the top shelf you cannot see out of the window, and you get the full benefit of the foul air from below. The disadvantage of the lower shelf, or the bench below it, is that you are apt to get sunflower seeds spat down on to you, and to have boots, or even worse, stockinged or bare feet dangling unpleasantly near your face. Actually it is against the regulations to take off boots and shoes in Russian railway carriages, but no one observes the rule, and walking along between the tiers of shelves you have to be careful not to get the feet sticking out from the ends in your eye or thrust under your nose. The smell of a Russian ' hard ' compartment is a smell of

feet and garlic; of sweat and dirty clothes and unwashed bodies; but chiefly of feet and garlic. The smell without the suffocating heat might be tolerable, or the heat without the smell, but the combination of the two is a nightmare which makes travelling 'hard' something not to be undertaken except when there is no alternative.

We are given seats beside a window, and are thankful not to be sent up to the roof. A family occupy the lower seats on the opposite side of the gangway. They are very busy with a huge and extremely juicy melon which they devour with immense relish, the juice running unregarded up their wrists and down their chins. The seat is a mess of juice and wet pips.

On the seat opposite a woman lies on her back on some bedding, and beside her, facing her, a man who is frankly amorous of her. Occasionally she raises a plump brown arm and places it round his neck and draws him down to her. They embrace ardently with a complete disregard for onlookers. His hands stray to her breasts and thighs, and finally she makes room for him on the seat beside her. He lies with one arm round her, his head on her shoulder, and they kiss and doze and caress, whilst the man and woman opposite, and the children on the shelf above, regard them complacently and suck and slobber their way through the huge slices of dripping melon.

Presently a guard comes along and severely rebukes the melon-eating family for the mess they have made. They proceed to clean it up with scraps of newspaper which they afterwards throw under the seat. They seem not at all put out by the reprimand, and the guard in turn appears to bear them no ill-feeling once the mess is cleaned up.

The woman of the pair opposite sits up, giving the whole of the seat to the man, who by this time sleeps heavily. He is a handsome animal, in the Caucasian manner, but she is a fat cross-eyed thing with a flat stupid face. She removes the comb from the back of her head and combs her lank short hair, then fishes about under the seat and produces a rush bag out of which she takes a greasy newspaper package, which, unwrapped, yields a yellowish leg of chicken and some sour cucumbers. The melon-eating family bring out a kettle, and at the next station the man runs helter-skelter across to the boiling water cistern. He boards

the train as it is moving out and returns triumphantly to his expectant family.

At the next station Donia joins the hot-water queue. Our tiny kettle provokes the usual derisive remarks, but our dried milk fascinates the melon family. Is it *Amerikantsi*, they want to know? They are amused at the idea of milk in tea, and they have never heard of dried milk. At the next station we join a melon queue and secure a melon before the train moves off. The melon family want to know what we had paid for it. They turn it over and punch it and pronounce it not so good as theirs, which from the point of view of juiciness it certainly is not.

At Beslan, after the slow, dragging journey, we find we have nearly three hours to wait. We sit in the usual over-heated buffet; there is what we have now come to regard as the inevitable stench, the inevitable very loud loud-speaker, the inevitable larger than life-size portrait of Stalin draped in red.

I am feeling ill, and exhausted again, and have an idea that a plate of hot soup might make me feel better. It isn't hot when at last it arrives, and it is extremely greasy. A number of very dirty and ragged beggar children hover around, begging surreptitiously, when railway officials and waitresses are not looking, and stealing hunks of bread from the tables. I give a couple of them the bread I have left. In the midst of the heat and smell and noise Donia sits sipping the hot-coloured water that passes for tea throughout Russia, and studying Russian grammar from a text-book. . . .

I put my head down on the table and surrender for a moment to feeling ill, and I reflect, Three hours—what *can* we do? We cannot wander about Beslan as we had Prochladnaya; it is dark, and there is nothing you can do in a Russian village after dark. There is nothing for it but to endure the heat and smell and noise as best one can. I drag my notebook out of my ruck-sack, not to be outdone by Donia and her grammar.

When we can stand the loud-speaker no longer we remove ourselves to the waiting-room adjoining. The heat and the smell are if anything even worse here. The air is thick; it presses against your face; it smothers you and you want to retch. Then you get used to it. There is anyhow no wireless here. The place is crowded with men, women and children,

with their bundles and bedding. Families are encamped on the floor with their great enamel kettles of tea, and huge hunks of black bread. A Russian railway station waiting-room is a camp. If you do not succeed in getting a ticket for a train one day you camp on the station till the next day. In Russia tomorrow is always another day. There is this Oriental philosophic quality in the Russian make-up. In any estimate of Russia and the Russians it is always important to remember that Russia is Asia as well as Europe—and more Asia than Europe. You can find Asia even in Moscow, and outside Moscow you cannot escape it.

There is no point in describing the journey from Beslan to Ordjonikidze. It was the same as the journey from Nalchik to Prochladnaya; the same as the journey from Prochladnaya to Beslan; wooden seats, wooden shelves, feet, heat, smell. It was dark by then, and the light in the coach too dim to read by. The train crawled. There was nothing to do but close one's eyes and tell oneself, This too will pass. . . .

It passed and we shouldered our rucksacks once more and came to the little town of Ordjonikidze, where we found ourselves back once more in the midst of civilisation; that is to say amongst street-cars, crowded pavements, lighted boulevards, Neon signs, cinemas.

The manager at the hotel took it for granted that we should be staying only the one night. There was nothing of interest in Ordjonikidze, he said; people only came to it as the starting-point of the Georgian Highway. Yes, yes, he would save us places on the 'bus in the morning. But it was not a 'bus, we should understand; it was an open car. . . . He showed us to a squalid room on the first floor. We flung ourselves down on to the gaunt beds, exhausted . . . only to jump up a few minutes later. A jazz band was bellowing away in the dining-room immediately below. In the dining-room of every hotel in the U.S.S.R. there is an inescapably loud jazz band. When we informed the manager that we could not be expected to sleep in a bedroom with a jazz band jazzing away till two in the morning, he transferred us to the top of the building, to an even more squalid room. We escaped the band here, but not the trams clattering past in the street below. We were relieved to find that

there was a bathroom in the hotel, and that it could produce a bath. We had our baths, but it was a nightmare ordeal. The heat in that bathroom surpassed anything I have ever known outside of the boiler room in a ship. In the middle of the room was a huge fiery furnace of a boiler, its fire roaring away with ferocious energy. I opened the door of the boiler to see whether anything could be done to damp the fire down, and had to step back immediately because of the fierce heat which leapt out. It was impossible to get close enough to the exposed fire to close the boiler-door except by kicking it to, leaning far back from the savage heat as one did so. The bathroom buzzed with flies. The walls and ceiling were black with them, and fat cockroaches wandered about over the floor and up the walls, their disgusting dull red bodies suggesting that they had been spawned by the fiery devil of that furnace.

We had been exhausted when we entered that bathroom. We staggered out of it nearly fainting.

We lay on the hard, narrow iron bedsteads in that squalid room listening to the ceaseless clatter of the trams, and trying to think of cool, silent mountains. . . .

XVII

THE GEORGIAN MILITARY HIGHWAY

ORDJONIKIDZE, or Vladikavkaz, 'Key of the Caucasus', as it used to be called, revealed itself in the morning as a pleasant enough little town, with flower-gardens and lawns in its well-planned boulevards, and the great peak of the Kazbek looming up at the ends of streets. Whilst we were somewhat impatiently pacing up and down outside the hotel waiting for the car which was to take us over this Georgian Military Highway we had heard so much about, an unhappy-looking woman who had been standing talking to a younger woman who carried a huge bunch of flowers, came up to Donia and showed her an envelope stamped and addressed for England. She explained that she had a sister living there, and having heard us speaking English together she wondered whether when we got back to England we would telephone her sister. Donia explained that it would be a long time, some months, before we were back in England; it didn't matter, the woman said, even in six months' time she would be glad if we would do this for her. Just to tell her sister that we had seen her, here in Ordjonikidze; her sister away at a place near London called Wood Green would like to know that, to speak with someone who had actually spoken with her relative. The woman's eyes filled with tears as she made this request. Her sister was very unhappy in England, she said; she wanted to come back to Russia, but it was not possible; she had not the money. We knew, perhaps, the address? Vaguely we felt that

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we had heard of Wood Green. We stared at the envelope; no county was indicated; it seemed unlikely, somehow, that a letter so vaguely addressed should arrive from anywhere as remote as Ordjonikidze. . . .

When at last the car arrived it proved to be the sort of small open 'charabanc' in which we had made the trip to Gnädenburg. We secured seats immediately behind the driver. Behind us sat two young men in round astrachan hats and long tightly-waisted overcoats, and next them the young woman with the bunch of flowers. When the car appeared to be completely full of passengers and their baggage a man arrived with a trunk and a large suitcase. In Russia no vehicle is ever so full that it won't hold more. By completely repacking all the baggage already stowed in the car, room was found for him and his.

Then, nearly an hour after the advertised time of departure, we got away. We were very quickly out of the town and in the valley of the River Terek in which begins this famous highway, which took over fifty years to construct, being begun in 1811 and opened in 1864. It cuts a way sheer through the mountains of the Caucasus from end to end, following the historic route through the great Dariel Gorge, along which swept the Persian armies, and the Mongol hordes of the terrible Tamerlane.

This *Route Militaire* which, as one of the leaflets about it says, '*demande une journée entière, une journée inoubliable*', has a tremendous reputation for scenic beauty, which two travellers at least found highly over-rated. But then I for one was never much of a one for gorges, and cannot be roused to a lyric ecstasy by desolation on however vast a scale. A great part of the journey traverses some of the most desolate country I have ever seen, sheer wildernesses of rocks and stones and boulders, with the jagged peaks of wild rocky mountains behind. One has a sense of desolation piled on desolation. In these savage wildernesses human beings are to be found living in the most incredible of seemingly uninhabitable hovels, wild-looking people wearing on their heads not hats but mere rough wigs of sheepskin. For hours on this '*journée inoubliable*' not a tree, or shrub, or blade of grass, is to be seen.

As soon as we entered the Terek valley we ran into veritable dust-storms, the wind blowing the soft deep dust of the road in

great clouds across the valley. At times these clouds of dust on the road ahead of us were so dense that we could see only a few feet before us, and the driver slowed the car down to a crawl. We were scarcely into the valley before the young woman with the bunch of flowers began to vomit, and one of the young men in the astrachan hats huddled into his great-coat, away from the bitter wind and the inescapable dust, and looked as though he would shortly follow suit—which he did.

Fantastically, between fits of vomiting, the young woman bent forward to point out various features of interest on the landscape to Donia and me. One of the things to which she drew our attention was the ruins of a castle perched up on a rock and said to be the stronghold of the beautiful and evil queen Thamar who waved a red handkerchief to wayfarers coming over the pass, luring them to the doom to which they found their way via her embraces. We were about to reply that we knew the legend through our acquaintanceship with the Russian Ballet, when our informant was once more surrendered to sickness. . . . How she could be bothered to keep bobbing up to pass some titbit of information on to us foreigners will ever be one of the mysteries of Russian human nature. She was ill all the way to Tiflis, that is to say all day, yet all the way she acted as our guide.

The journey seemed interminable. As we climbed, the cold became intense, and the scenery grimmer. At times the road became a mere ledge cut along a perpendicular rock-face. I am acquainted with the nature of mountain scenery above the tree-line, but I have nowhere seen so savage a desolation as that which characterises the Georgian Highway at its highest point, that is to say going over the Gudaur—or Goudaour—Pass at an altitude of seven thousand feet or more. Here there were drifts of snow, and we ran into clouds which collapsed round us in a bitterly cold drizzle, shutting out the valley far down below. Looking round at the rest of the passengers huddled up behind us, they all looked cold and wretched. The young man in the astrachan hat had sunk into his companion's lap. He looked extremely ill. The young woman with the flowers was hidden inside her coat.

Here and there amidst the desolation, the ruins of deserted villages were visible perched up on rocky crags, and every

village has its watch-tower or fortress. The fortress of Ananour, one such village, has the conical shaped tower characteristic of Armenian architecture. A long tunnel is being constructed in the pass for the use of cars when the roads are snow-bound.

When we emerged from the pass there was a halt of a few minutes in a village in which there had been an accident recently, a lorry having gone over the edge of the road into the valley. A number of the visitors were studying the scene of the disaster when we arrived; the low parapet on the valley side of the road had broken away; the lorry was somewhere down there in the view. Everyone got out of the car to go and look. Donia and I had a more urgent requirement. We had hoped for an hotel, but since there was none we passed on into the yard of the farm outside which the car was halted. We encountered a woman coming out of a shed and asked her if we might use the W.C. She waved us across the muddy yard. Crossing it we found a row of wooden huts from which came the most dreadful smell. The doors of the huts all stood wide open and the filth exposed was indescribable. The wooden floors and seats were covered with excrement, and every hut was filled with a buzzing black cloud of flies.

In our innocence we believed that we were looking at the most unspeakable sanitary arrangements human beings could devise. We were mistaken. This was merely a beginning.

When we returned to the car the two sick passengers were still huddled there, never having left it. The young man moaned to his companion that he could not go on, that he must stay here in this village. But he went on, lying like a sick child across the other man's knees. He was a pitiable sight. The young woman vanished inside her coat again, her flowers crushed down, now, disregarded, at her feet.

Soon after passing the great tunnel the road begins to descend innumerable zigzags to the wide and lovely Aragva valley, and we are in Georgia. Here the desolation of rocks is left behind, and wilderness merges into grassy slopes; the bitter wind drops, the air is less cold, and soon there are a few trees, and then a semi-tropical profusion of trees. The colours of autumn re-assert themselves; warmth and colour comes back into the world. And the relief of it, after hours and hours of a sunless, wind-swept

wilderness of rocks and boulders ! If I have said nothing of the grandeur of snowy peaks, some of the highest in Europe, or of the savage majesty of the gorge, it is because I was overwhelmed by the sense of desolation . . . and too intensely cold. Even my flowery French leaflet can find nothing to say concerning the pass but that it is '*le point le plus élevé de la route*', whereas it grows lyrical over the descent, which, it declares, '*a été comparée, par certains voyageurs, à une descente en avion*'.

In a wide golden valley flowing between wooded hills a number of children ran out to meet the car, offering thick tumblers full of shelled walnuts. We slowed down and the children swarmed on to the running-board of the car and did a brisk business with the passengers. They were lovely healthy-looking children with bold impudent eyes and flashing smiles. At other points along the road peasants offered us live chickens, and pears tied together on a string.

We halted for a meal at a village which is the official entry into Georgia. There is an hotel here set in a sub-tropic garden with a sort of *patio* on which one may eat. A trellis over which creepers and flowers are trained screens this courtyard, and there are palms growing in tubs, and a verandah with tables ranged along, and all very attractive it looked in sunshine when we arrived. We seated ourselves at a table on the verandah, telling ourselves that when we had ordered some food we would go and wash. A number of scruffy-looking little waiters in grubby ducks rushed about, the sweat pouring down their faces, but it was about twenty minutes before we could even induce one to take our order. When we had ordered what seemed to be the least greasy item on the limited menu we crossed the yard below this raised *patio* to what looked like a collection of pig-styes, but which from the traffic we had seen coming and going we knew to be the lavatories—at least we hoped that they were lavatories, and not merely water-closets. That they were the one we realised full well as we drew near. Opening a door, and thereby breaking a black cloud of flies, we were confronted with a flight of wooden steps up. At the top of the steps was a wooden platform and a few feet across this a hole. It was impossible, however, to reach the hole as the intervening few feet was too thickly covered with filth.

Leaving this disgusting place we inquired in the hotel whether there was a place in which we could wash. We were shown an outside tap above a stopperless basin. We joined the small queue of people waiting to use this 'convenience', which faced on to the *patio*.

When we got back to our table the waiter informed us that the food we had ordered was no longer available; only *bortsch* was left. After another long wait plates of this were brought to us. It was the usual half-cold greasy mess. In the courtyard below was a bear chained to a post. Various louts came and prodded him with sticks at intervals.

Returning to the car we found the sick passengers still huddled there. There was a strong smell of petrol which must have made them feel if possible worse than ever.

The next stop was beside a road-side fountain. Two women who stood there drew their white head-shawls across the lower part of their faces as we approached. A frightful-looking old man, like a skeleton over which a very thin parchment has been stretched, held out a begging hand.

We passed on the road a number of covered waggons, full of bedding and children, and long trains of ox-waggons heaped with maize stubble and trailing dried ribbons of leaves, used as bedding for cattle. Later we saw the covered-waggon people camped on a piece of waste-ground just outside Tiflis. We noticed already a change in the faces of the people; they were smaller, thinner, longer, and there were no more sheepskin and astrachan hats.

The light was fading as we approached Tiflis, emphasising the quality of sadness in the curiously tender loveliness of the landscape. It is a landscape of broad, softly flowing, river between gentle hills, of a romantic-looking old fortress thrusting up beside the river, of an ancient, sombre monastery looking down from a hill, and Tiflis in the near-distance sprawling over hills on either side the river. Gentle and romantic it all is, like an old monk, and with the evening shadows darkening the glimmering water and misting the soft contours of the hills, filled with a strange sense of benediction.

Suddenly I knew that Tiflis would be beautiful, and, for the first time in weeks, ceased to gnaw the nail of hurry. . . .

XVIII

TIFLIS: GEORGIAN COSMOPOLIS

THERE was a time when there seemed to me something ineffably absurd about the name Tiflis. As a place, it had no more substance and reality in my imagination than Timbuctoo or Turnham Green. Turnham Green might conceivably be a place you would inadvertently pass through in a train, but under no circumstance—unless you have been there—can you imagine yourself walking into a shipping office or a tourist agency or arriving at a railway station and asking for a ticket to Timbuctoo. There are more outlandish places, as a matter of mere geography, but nowhere more 'unlikely'—unless it be Tiflis. If you had been to Timbuctoo and people asked where you had been, you would feel constrained to add: 'I have really—I'm not joking'. Because the name is somehow a joke—like the night-life of Wigan. That Wigan may have a night-life of its own, of cafés and cinemas, does not dispose of the joke, any more than the fact that Timbuctoo is 'the port of the Sahara in the Sudan', and a town of some importance and interest, makes it any more real to those to whom it is merely a name. Some places there are which if you have never been to them remain merely names. You may never have been to Buda-Pest. I haven't. But there is nothing unlikely or unreal about it. As there is about Tiflis and Timbuctoo. When I was a child I even thought that Timbuctoo wasn't a real place at all. It was one of the places people bade you go to, like Hell or Jericho or The Devil, when they were impatient

with you. It was like talking 'double Dutch'. There was no such thing; no such place.

Until I was about twenty-five I had never heard of Tiflis, and then for years after that I never knew where it was, and you, dear reader, who know your map of Russia, and are feeling superior at this point, here is a story about Tiflis which proves that I am not alone in my ignorance, or in the feeling I once had that there was something ineffably silly about even the idea of a place called Tiflis.

It was at a luncheon at a West End hotel. One of the more Mayfair hotels, which somehow makes the story madder, for it was all so grand, and not at all the sort of atmosphere in which to tell one of those stories which have to be 'demonstrated'. The teller of the story writes a daily column in a leading newspaper, and a lot of people find this column funny, and if I fail to find it as funny as some people it is because I am a little tired of him using my name as a joke: 'Miss Ethel Mannin, we hear, has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize', and 'Miss Ethel Mannin, Jack Hobbs, and other well-known sportsmen', and so forth . . . I mean you can overdo that sort of thing. But I confess I found his Tiflis story funny, though it left half the luncheon party dazed.

'Have you heard,' he asked, 'about the streets of Tiflis?'

When we said that we hadn't, he produced a box of matches from his pocket, laid three on the table in a row, then three about an inch away, then held one upright at a corner, and announced, solemnly, 'The streets of Tiflis by day'. He then struck the match he had been holding up at the corner of the little lane of matches, and holding it again in the same position, remarked: 'The streets of Tiflis by night.'

Some people, of course, see nothing funny in the utterly absurd.

When one or two of us had recovered from our laughter, and the rest from their stupor, I asked him: "But why Tiflis?"

"Oh, I don't know," he replied. "It has to be Tiflis."

"Where *is* Tiflis?" I demanded.

"I don't know. Persia. Down that way, anyhow. Does it matter?"

Someone else asked wasn't it in India. Others were inclined

to think it was in Persia, or Turkey. Anyhow, 'somewhere in that direction'.

For a long time I thought no more about Tiflis, though occasionally I tried out the match joke on people, to test their sense of humour, and once or twice in books I made airy references to Timbuctoo or Tiflis when I wanted to be facetious . . . till at last an irate reader wrote and said, with that humourlessness peculiar to irate readers, that Tiflis was the very beautiful capital of Georgia, and he hoped that some time in the course of my travels I would visit it, when I would perhaps cease to regard it as a joke. I think he said Tiflis was his home-town, but cannot be sure about that. Anyhow, I replied politely that I hoped one day to include the capital of Georgia in my travels, and then dismissed it from my mind, because I didn't know where Georgia was. Vaguely I had heard a song about everything being peaches down in Georgia, which sounded somewhere down Carolina way, wherever that is.

Then in Paris I met a woman who had fought in the Russian army during the war, an immense masculine creature, and I was told that she was a Georgian. I had already been told that she was Russian. Georgia, someone explained to me, patiently, is part of the U.S.S.R. The other place, I gathered, where the cuties and the peaches and the red-hot rhythm came from, had nothing to do with it. That left me wondering where this one was, but at least I had got the important one right—the one that has Tiflis for its capital.

It may be true, as Somerset Maugham says somewhere, that though we live we do not learn, but nevertheless we acquire knowledge.

Thus, having over the course of years learned that Tiflis is the capital of Georgia, and that there are two Georgias and that the one of which Tiflis is the capital is Russian, when Voks made Tiflis part of their itinerary, I no longer felt that there was anything droll about going to a place called Tiflis —which in the ancient Georgian means 'hot springs'—and if I had heard the streets-of-Tiflis story then for the first time, probably should not have thought it funny.

I did not know what to expect of Tiflis until that moment when I saw the river with the evening shadows on it, and the

enfolding hills misty in the fading light, and had that sudden feeling of a prelude to beauty.

Tiflis, walled in by its hills, fir trees on either side its main street, has great physical beauty, but it has a quality I found in no other city of the U.S.S.R., a quality which has no part in the intense nationalism of modern Russia, that quality of cosmopolis which gives a city warmth, colour, vitality. Here at last, I felt, was the free flow of life, life with all the movement and variety of the sea, instead of channelised into the straight and narrow and damnably dull canal that nationalism makes of it. To live happily in Moscow you need to be either Russian or of the Communist faith; in Tiflis you do not feel this demand; there is not the insistent reminder of *Russia;* it is cosmopolis. Cosmopolitan suggests a raggle-taggle colourfulness, a squalor defined in tourist jargon as 'picturesque', and whilst there is all of this to be found in the old town, the new is a fine modern city, with handsome buildings, fine stores, broad pavements, well-planned boulevards, yet in spite of all this Five-Year-Plan progressiveness, still retaining that feeling of cosmopolis which makes Tiflis curiously un-Russian. My first impression of it, as entered in my diary, was that it was 'the cleanest, brightest, and "best-looking" Russian town yet seen, and the general standard of appearance of people in the street the most superior. They are better dressed, altogether brighter looking. There is nothing here of that awful depressing greyness.'

Even in the hotel there was a feeling of escape from Russia The guide was a lovely-looking creature, an Armenian, charming and intelligent, and instead of pestering us and bullying us as other guides had done, when we told her on the second day that we preferred just to wander about the city to being taken anywhere, said she agreed with us that it was the best way to get a real impression of the city. "One of you speaks Russian, and you have roubles—you do not need a guide." It was, of course, what we had been saying all along the line, but no other guide had ever been able to grasp the fact, let alone think it up for herself. The manager instead of being a nagging bureaucrat was a charming worldly person who treated us as adult worldly people instead of as half-wits or children, or a deadly species of human beings known as 'tourists'. When we told him

that we did not wish any arrangements to be made for us in Baku, he asked no awkward, tiresome questions, but merely said Very well. When we said that in a day or two our visas would expire and that we had been unable to get them renewed because once again we had arrived on a rest-day, but that we did not want to be held up in Tiflis waiting for them to be renewed, he calmly suggested that we should wait till we got back to Moscow. There was no need to worry. It would be all right. A little overdue, what did it matter? We were entirely of his opinion, but had become so expectant of the tyranny of bureaucracy everywhere that we had not expected to meet such a sweet reasonableness in any hotel manager.

Unfortunately he was equally happy-go-lucky over a matter concerning which we should have liked him to have taken a rather more serious view. This was the matter of the absence of water in our bathroom. We had a charming suite, two handsome rooms, entrance hall, private bathroom, and it was galling, to say the least of it, to have so fine a bathroom yet be unable to have a much-needed bath. He shrugged. We should mention it to the chambermaid. We mentioned it. She shrugged. She would mention it to the chamberman. The chamberman came and looked at the bath, gloomily, turned on a tap. Nothing happened. He shrugged. He could only offer it as his opinion that something had gone wrong. He would mention it to the manager. Donia told him that we had already done that. He shrugged. In that case there was nothing more to be done. Perhaps, he added, hopefully, it would right itself. There might be air in the pipe. He turned the taps on again. There might have been air; there certainly wasn't water. Perhaps by tomorrow it would be all right, he said. Tomorrow—what would Russia do without that word?

We did not retain this fine suite after one night. The eternal Russian tram-car clattered beneath our windows till the small hours of the morning. The quiet room at the back to which we chose to be transferred had no bathroom, but, as the manager pointed out, since a bathroom did not necessarily mean a bath, that could scarcely matter.

The hotel looked through the graceful fir trees of the main road to the great Palace of the Soviets, then in the course of

construction. Behind rose the hills which close in so protectively on the city, shielding it from the winds and making it warm in winter, and stiflingly hot and airless in the summer. There is a funicular up the hill at this point, known as Mont David, and from the top a magnificent view of the city and its surrounding mountains. On the way to the funicular we stood for some time watching and listening to a gentle-looking old man and a lovely little boy and girl, the man and boy playing violins, and the girl a balalaika. The children were obviously bored and not trying, and occasionally the old man rebuked them for their shiftless playing. All three were neatly dressed, and had intelligent, sensitive faces. A small crowd gathered round when Donia began to sketch them, and our interest in them added considerably to their collection. It was the day of rest, and it is possible that the old man was adding to his earnings by playing at street-corners with the children. Or they may have been professional itinerants. Whatever the case, they did not look poverty-stricken.

Continuing our way up to the funicular after this pleasant break of music in sunshine—and there is something pleasantly vagabondish about this kind of street music—we passed a number of Pioneers, boys and girls in their early teens, the lads in white shirts and shorts, the girls in white blouses and dark skirts, all wearing the red Pioneer handkerchief knotted round their necks, marching down towards the centre of the town. Later, in the big central square, we saw a mass assembly of people wearing red shirts. We had already seen a large contingent of conscripts marching away. The previous morning we had watched from our hotel window the men and women workers on the Soviet building opposite marching and drilling before mounting the scaffolding for their day's work.

There is a student quarter to Tiflis, in which a great number of new and pleasant-looking blocks of flats have been, and are in course of being, erected. On the outskirts of every Russian town there is a growth of new homes, usually in the form of blocks of flats rising up like piles of boxes. Apart from the students' quarter, Stalin's home-town appears to be building less energetically than other cities, however, and I, personally, would like to have seen the building of a fine new theatre

postponed whilst the building of apartments was speeded up, for in the old town there are people living in the most incredible conditions. Climbing the hill over which the old town straggles, rising above the blue domes of ancient mosques and the Moorish tiles of the hot sulphur baths, we came into steep cobbled streets whose houses became more and more decrepit as we ascended. Some of these old houses have the remains of an ancient Georgian grace, with wooden balconies with carved bannisters and wooden pillars, and eaves with elaborate woodwork like that which characterises Swiss chalets and the wooden houses of the Austrian Tyrol. Lines of washing fluttering on some of these balconies, and mattresses hung over the balustrades, made patches of colour in a crumbling wooden chaos. In cobbled courtyards barelegged and barefooted women did washing at communal stone troughs or under pumps, and turkeys, geese, chickens, wandered about over the cobbles. Everywhere was a sense of teeming life, squalid, but vivid, colourful, in the Neapolitan manner. Donia stopped and made a sketch, and the usual crowd gathered. I left her to it, and wandering away found a street one tier higher in which women filled buckets and kettles at a pump in the middle of the road. Acacia trees stretched scrawny arms out over broken walls; white spirals of dust blew over waste-heaps that had once been houses. There was a church out of whose inner darkness streamed a smell of incense, and from which old women emerged crossing themselves. Donia joined me and we continued to climb from tier to tier of the cobbled streets, the houses becoming more and more collapsed looking, and then we observed that every few yards flights of steps led down from the broken pavement to basements into which rickety wooden doors of cellars opened out, and we became aware that, incredibly, these cellars were occupied. At first it was difficult to make out more than shadowy figures squatting on the earth floors in the darkness of the cellars, then as our eyes grew accustomed to the lack of light, we saw dark eyes looking out of brown faces, the gleam of brightly coloured clothes, the glitter of coins worn as ear-rings and necklaces, of brass ornaments in turbanned head-dresses.

We descended a flight of filthy steps and paused at the door

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TIFLIS: A TYPICAL STREET-SCENE IN THE OLD TOWN

of one of these cellars. Two young women and an old woman sat on the earth floor, piles of wool and rag refuse at their crossed feet, and against a wall a pile of quilted covers. They were picking over the refuse, making flock for stuffing quilts. A young girl leaned against one wall; she wore a full red skirt and an embroidered waistcoat; bound round her head with a black scarf was a swathe of white material which draped her shoulders. She wore her dark hair in two long plaits braided with coins and faded ribbons. The women were similarly clad, their bright dirty clothes all odds and ends of tunics, waistcoats, aprons, shawls, scarves, sashes. The old woman drew the ends of her head-dress round her face as we stood staring. Donia smiled and addressing them in Russian asked if she might make a sketch of them. They shook their heads, not understanding, whereupon an intelligent-looking boy of about thirteen sprang out of a dark corner and answered for them, in Russian. They were Kurds, he said, and did not speak Russian, but he learned it at school. He turned eagerly to the women, obviously trying to reassure them concerning us, but they shook their heads and veiled their faces. He continued to argue with them and finally persuaded them.

We sat down on the dirty steps and Donia made her drawing and I mental notes. At first we believed that these Kurds only sat in this cellar to work, but the boy told us they lived there. I looked round the cellar for signs of human habitation, but there was nothing but an enamel tea-pot on the floor, and some mugs. In one corner a brass pitcher glinted. There was a heap of rags in another corner. There was no furniture of any kind, and when the door was closed there would be only such light and air as penetrated through the chinks in the broken boards. Further up the hill, the boy told us, we would find Tartars living, a great many of them.

We continued up the hill and came to rows of the most fantastic hovels built literally on rubbish-heaps. There was a frightful smell from the excrement deposited all round these disgusting dwellings. We picked our way through the filth and came out to the naked hill-side beyond the last hovel. Looking down on to them was like looking down on to a heap of brick and wooden ruins. Here and there were brick houses that had

caved in, and were now obviously used as latrines. The rest was a confusion of inhabited and uninhabited wooden sheds, of a dilapidation beyond description. It was even more difficult to imagine human beings living in such places than in those cellars. Yet the children playing about amongst the ruins and scampering over the filthy ground looked happy and healthy enough, and we had observed very few beggars in the city.

There is no grass on this rubbish-heap of a hill. It is like the crater of a volcano, all loose shale and dry, crumbling earth. We climbed some distance up behind the last of the hovels and found that it extended into a range of arid hills, with a cemetery a little below, in a hollow, and across a shallow valley the tropical luxuriance of the Botanic Gardens. There is a terrible desolation about these arid hills, but the view from them, across the valley and the river, is very fine. On the cliff-escarpment on the far side of the river stands the sombre old Castle of Mateth, built by the Turks at the end of the sixteenth century, converted to a prison when the Russians took Georgia in the eighteenth century, and now about to be turned into a museum. Armenian churches with their cowl-like towers thrust up above a medley of white houses and red roofs. The blue dome of the Persian mosque is brilliant in the sunshine. Lines of washing wave gay banners from the many wooden balconies of old Georgian houses. The red blur of a mattress creeps like the dull flame of bougainvillea over a balustrade. There is a façade purely Venetian, there a Spanish courtyard, there an Italian alleyway, there a glimpse of Stamboul; there the Orient encroaches, and there intrudes America. . . . Truly, Cosmopolis, thy name is Tiflis.

The history of Tiflis is one of perpetual and cosmopolitan ravishment. The Persians captured it in the sixth century and held it for ten years. After them came the Greeks, in the seventh century, and in the eighth the Khazars—those strange people of the steppe who go back to the second century—and the Arabs. It had intervals of reverting to Georgian control, and then in the fourteenth century came Tamerlane, after him the Turks, and at the end of the seventeenth century the Lesghians, ancient wild tribes of Daghestan. In the eighteenth century the Shah of Persia attacked Tiflis, and Russia was aroused to

'protect' the city and did what protectors invariably do, that is to say, settled into permanent occupation.

The Tiflis of today carries the imprint of her many and varied ravishments on her architecture, her temperament, and on her population.

The broad streets of the new town and the narrow streets of the old swarm with *la foule cosmopolite*, Persians, Georgians, Russians, Kirghis, Tartars, Turks, Kurds, Greeks, Armenians, Turcs, and Jews who look as though they had walked straight out of the pages of the Old Testament. There are trousered women, veiled women, women in brightly coloured petticoats, women wrapped to the eyes in black shawls, women in coats and skirts. European dress predominates, even in the old town, but there is enough national costume still retained to give colour and variety to the streets.

On the way down from the rubbish-heap to the old town proper we passed down a street in which the lower part of the houses consisted of windowless rooms such as might be used for store-rooms or garages; they had double doors like garages, but very rickety and broken; some of these doors were slightly ajar, and we glimpsed people squatting on the floors in the dark interior. In one such room a woman stood at a washtub. In several there was the glint of brass bedsteads. Men and women sat on chairs in the gutters opposite these sheds of dwellings, and fires had been lighted and kettles and frying-pans were balanced on bricks. The family life is lived for the most part out in the street in this fashion, the sheds only used as shelters and to sleep in. There are similar shed dwellings in the narrow cobbled streets on the way up to the Botanic Gardens.

In many of the narrow streets of the old town you can buy Georgian silverware, dried fruits of the East, Persian rugs and silks; here you lose the vast efficient machine of the U.S.S.R. in the centuries old Orientalism of Eastern bazaar and market. There are numerous tea-houses and eating-houses in the old town. The latter specialise in sausages fried in butter, wrapped in a thin pancake, then sprinkled with chopped onion. Beer is drunk with this dish. Several times looking in at the windows of these eating-houses, watching the food sizzling, and studying the variety of faces—all male—of the customers perched up on

stools at the long counters, we were invited with friendly smiles to join the company, but the greasy smell alone would have kept us out. We did, however, surrender to the smiling invitation of a Persian who invited us into his tea-house. We were watching his assistant refuelling the samovar with charcoal, when the Persian came to the door and suggested that we should come in and have some tea. The place was full of flies, not very clean, and full of fierce-looking Tartars, but we were very tired from our wanderings on the rubbish-heap, and we preferred the friendliness of the tea-house for the refreshing glasses of tea we so acutely needed to the gloomy grandeur of the hotel dining-room. The Persian chatted amicably whilst we sipped the weak tea. He was a handsome creature, and much interested in the fact that we came all the way from England. They got few English visitors, he said, but during the season many Americans came. What, he asked, were the conditions of the working-classes in England. . . .

We got up early in the morning to go to the market, which is very large, and to which we had been recommended as a happy hunting-ground for people like ourselves interested in the numerous nationalities inhabiting Tiflis and grafted into Georgian stock. The market is held in a huge cobbled square, with a parking ground for carts and waggons, horses and oxen, across the road. From the point of view of interest it is not to be compared with the Nalchik market, but it has a richer show of produce, good apples and tomatoes instead of bruised and green ones, and great quantities of vegetables instead of mere handfuls. It has numerous haberdashery and clothing kiosks and small shops, and meat shops. There were also plants and cut flowers for sale. We found the ' types ' were less interesting and varied than we had been led to expect; the streets were, in point of fact, far more interesting.

And as interesting as any market from the point of view of ' life ' was the view from out back room in the hotel. Our windows here looked on an inner court, surrounded on two sides by the backs of houses. Out into this courtyard in the early morning came the women of the various households, lighting fires on the cobbles, filling kettles at the pump, beating rugs and mattresses, doing washing at wooden tubs on trestle

tables, and generally bringing their domestic life out into the open. The family tea-kettle would be deposited on the cobbles, and the family come out and sit on the doorstep, or squat round the fire, chewing at the hunks of black bread which appears to be the staple diet of Russia, along with its cabbage soup and its frightful tea. The houses were apparently only used for sleeping in. Even on a drizzling wet morning I watched a woman standing out in this yard doing her washing and keeping an eye on the kettle coming to a boil on the spluttering fire on the cobbles.

We left Tiflis in brilliant sunshine and with real regret. We went to see an exhibition of Georgian painting before we left, but it was excessively dull, the usual photographic realism which is encouraged in the U.S.S.R. as socialist realism—which, it is claimed, all great art must be, all else being considered bourgeois.

When we came out of the exhibition I regarded with interest the very fine modern building opposite. I inquired of Donia what was written across its imposing entrance.

Following the direction of my eyes, she translated: "House of connections——"

We discovered afterwards that it was the post-office.

XIX

FLYING TO BAKU

IT was a good day for flying when we left Tiflis; the sun shone brilliantly, the sky was cloudless, there was no wind. We had, however, no real faith in there being a machine. We had at first been told that it left at eleven o'clock, then at twelve, and were quite prepared for it not to leave at all. When the car turned in at the airport there was no sign of any aeroplane. All we could see was empty fields, haystacks, byres. Chickens wandered about, and a woman was pegging out a line of washing between the ricks. The driver left the engine of the car running whilst he went into the airport building. He was gone for about fifteen minutes, and we feared the worst. There was no 'plane in sight, and there obviously wasn't going to be any 'plane. When the driver returned, Donia asked him if anything was wrong. He said, No, only that two more places than existed had been booked on the machine; two of the passengers would have to be turned away.

"That'll be us," I said gloomily, when Donia told me. "We're clearly fated not to fly anywhere in the U.S.S.R."

The driver shut off the engine and leaned against the car, negligently picking his teeth. The sun had a midday intensity. It glimmered over the wide empty flying-field like water, and hovered in a haze round the bonnet of the car.

Nothing happened for some time, and then a number of men came out on to the verandah of the building behind and

stood watching, and a few minutes later mechanics appeared and began wheeling a machine out of a hangar.

"What," asked Donia, "will happen to the two passengers for whom there are no places?"

The driver shrugged. "They can go tomorrow. Or they can go by train."

"But it's disgraceful," I cried, when Donia had translated. "If such a thing happened in England another 'plane would be run."

Now the propellers of the machine were in action, and a great roar filled the field. The watchers came down from the verandah and began marching towards the machine.

"You go now," the driver told us, jerking his head towards the 'plane.

We joined the small crowd of men standing by the 'plane. When the signal was given we mounted the steps and entered the narrow, claustrophobic confines of the machine. We seated ourselves; there appeared to be a place for everyone who had come aboard. Perhaps the two too many had been sent empty away? Anyhow, the door slammed, there was a roar of acceleration, and we were off.

As we climbed up into the blue and all over again I thought, Heavens, how I hate flying! I glanced across at Donia. She was leaning back with her eyes closed, a pained expression on her face. The floor of the machine was covered with mail-bags. It would be impossible to step out into the gangway; one would have to crawl over the bags, and they were stacked up against the door of the lavatory at the tail of the machine. If the worst happened and one were sick there would be nothing for it but to be sick on the mail. Usually there are paper bags tucked into a pocket on the back of the seat in front, but there were none in this machine. We concentrated on the scenery.

We flew over a great deal of swamp, scattered forest, stretches of steppe. Large tracks of swamp and of fir forest characterise Western Transcaucasia, viewed from the air; going east the land assumes an increasingly barren, treeless aspect, till it is finally sheer desert and mountains of solid stone.

After about two hours we came down at an aerodrome which appeared to be combined with a farm, as at Tiflis. We bought

sausage and black bread and a green apple at the buffet and wandered about, munching, thankful to be out of that hot, noisy confined space and breathing the good air again. What I had seen of the farm from the air interested me, and we walked over towards what from the air had looked like mud huts in a compound, African-native fashion. It seemed incredible that farm-workers of the U.S.S.R. should be living in such primitive conditions, but the impression from the air proved to be correct. We looked into one hut. There was no furniture. There were a few rags on the earth floor, in one corner, and in the middle a wooden bowl and a brass jug. A half-naked baby lay howling in the dirt. Whilst we peered a handsome dark-skinned woman with fine eyes and teeth emerged from the darkness and smiled at us. Her head was swathed with a sort of faded blue turban with ends flowing on to her shoulders; she wore her hair in plaits. We learned afterwards that these mud huts were inhabited by Persians, and were assured that they refused better living conditions, preferring this primitive, insanitary life.

The second half of the flight was over vast expanses of desert and ranges of the most savage mountains I have ever seen. We flew very high over these mountains, and I was seized by the most agonising ear-ache, the like of which I have never known in a fairly wide experience of flying. There was a slight relief as we approached the oil-fields and flew lower, but I have never felt so ill on any flight, and Donia, whose maiden-flight it was, muttered 'Never again' from white lips when we landed. . . .

The Caspian was a vivid blue-green, and, in the shallows near the shore, so clear that the bottom was visible. It was like painted glass in its smoothness and brilliant colouring. The yellow desert had now given place to the oozing black earth of the oil-fields; the shafts rose at first like clusters of gaunt pines, then like pine woods, then, as we neared Baku, became thick forests.

We came down in a flying-field where there was an untidy garden in which a few scented lupins and straggling stocks still bloomed. We climbed up into a waiting lorry and were bumped along, in a bitter wind, beside the Caspian which had now assumed the colourlessness of the fading light.

From now on we were on our own. No more tickets would

be bought for us, no more hotel arrangements made. No wires had been sent to Baku. We were supposed to have friends there. So there we were, with our coveted independence and our expired visas, on the edge of that forbidden sea which divided Europe and Asia. It should be a matter of only a few days now before we were in Samarkand.

XX

BAKU: WIND-CITY

IF there is anything in industry more hideous than an oil-field I should like to know. Pit-heads and slag-heaps are grim enough, but there is something monstrous about a great forest of oil-shafts rising up out of their black mud. The road from the airport into Baku is a drive through a nightmare forest which seems never-ending. On the oil-fields themselves, and all along this desolate road, are unspeakable hovels, many of them like the foulest kind of pig-sties in the last stages of disrepair. One collection of huts was like nothing so much as an assembly of dilapidated rabbit-hutches. It was difficult to think of human beings inhabiting them, but there was every evidence that they did. It is impossible to exaggerate the dreadfulness of these hovels. One would think that not even the most wretched and degraded of human beings could possibly live in them; not even under the Tsars could workers have lived under more dreadful conditions. But whereas under the Tsars it was taken for granted that workers should live like ill-kept pigs, under the Soviets the building of workers' homes goes on apace. At the outskirts of Baku numerous blocks of modern flats have been erected, and are in course of erection; they have been described as being 'among the finest things that the whole of Transcaucasia has to show'. In addition to these blocks of apartments there are numerous small white-washed houses like Irish cabins which are part of the oil-workers' settlements.

The first impression of Baku itself is that it is a hideous city, but it improves on acquaintance. It abounds in interest, both in the old town and what is being done in the new.

Our own first impression of it was gathered in driving round in a droshky—there are no taxis—trying to find a room. We did not want to stay at the Intourist hotel because when we left Baku we should not be in a position to say where we were going next, which is what Intourist hotel managers always want to know. The airport lorry deposited us outside the Intourist hotel, but we shouldered our rucksacks and walked away into a side-street, where we found a droshky. Donia told the driver that there was no room in the Intourist hotel and asked him to take us to the next best. He drove us to a dingy-looking place, but there was no room; nor was there any room at two or three more to which we drove. At one place there was a tiny cupboard of a room with no window. At the next place there would be a room in a few hours' time. We decided to take it without seeing it. We were then asked for our papers. We produced our passports, and immediately the manager flung them back to us across the counter, making clicking noises with his tongue. Our place was in the Intourist hotel. Donia told him that it was full up. A man who had been leaning against the counter idly watching us suddenly came to life at that. He was the manager of the Intourist hotel, he said, and there was room there. He could not understand why we believed it to be full up. Confusedly Donia explained to him that we understood that as we had not wired reserving a room, it would be of no use trying to get in there.

Well, there we were, back under the wings of Intourist, very 'suspect', trying to sneak in to other hotels, and caught out in lying about the reason why. . . .

We told each other gloomily that we should never escape Intourist, and that when we came to leave the hotel, inummerable awkward questions would be asked before our passports were given back to us. Our visas were almost expired, too, and if we tried to renew them in Baku, heaven only knew how long we should be held up. We might miss a chance of a boat. . . . We resolved that if we could get away without doing so we would

not attempt to get our visas renewed; we must get out of Baku as quickly as possible.

We were given a squalid room at the top of the hotel. It commanded a good view out over the city. Minarets thrust up from the huddle of roofs, and there were the domes of mosques. Above the clangour of the streets came the intermittent call of ships. The sound filled me with restlessness. It was a cry to be gone, to be gone, across that forbidden sea. I leaned out of that high window and saw in the narrow street far down below, children swarming like flies over the garbage in an open dust-cart. There was the clatter of horses' hooves on cobbles, and that inescapable din of trams. The lights were beginning to come out like fallen stars all over the city sloping down to the sea's pale edge. I should know no peace till I was safely aboard a ship—any kind of a ship—crossing it. But even then—did they ask to see one's papers on the other side? There was no frontier; why should they? But we didn't know, and we dare not ask. . . .

We washed, then ate in a hideously ugly would-be 'modern' dining-room, swarming with flies, and went out into the streets. The night-life of Baku seems to consist of promenading up one side and down the other of the main street. There is an arcade of shops, raised a few feet above the road, and being bored with the side of the street on which we found ourself, we thought we would cross to the arcade and look at the little lighted shops under its arches. But no sooner had we set foot off the kerb than whistles blew shrilly. It was a few moments before we realised that it was we who were being whistled, and by then we were half-way across the road. A policeman stepped down from a sort of wooden stool in the middle of the road and approached us.

"Pretend not to understand," Donia muttered, then regarded him, smilingly, with an air of innocence.

He looked so angry, and she so innocent, that I was seized with the giggles, whereupon he turned very fiercely upon me.

I did not know then, of course, but it appears that he bade me, sternly, 'not to laugh at authority'.

"Don't laugh," Donia muttered. "He doesn't like it. Just look worried."

I arranged my face accordingly.

"Intourist," Donia informed him brightly.

"Intourist?" he thundered at us.

We nodded eagerly.

An expression of relief settled down on his face, and he waved us across the road and into freedom.

Attempting to recross the road a little later, there was another shrill whistling, and this time a policeman came dashing up on a motor-bicycle. Again we assumed an air of bewilderment and again Donia muttered the magic word, "Intourist". This time, however, our 'papers' were demanded. A little guiltily, remembering our expired visas, we produced our passports. A small crowd began to gather round. The policeman glanced at the passports, then handed them back with a smile.

"Go in peace," he commanded us.

In the morning we allowed ourselves to be taken on a drive round the city. Our guide was a severe-looking little woman, and inclined to be dictatorial, but well informed—though inclined to be too inquisitive as to how we had come to arrive in Baku from Tiflis without the hotel being notified. We in turn tried to pump her about Turkestan. Yes, she had been. It was very interesting. No, English people could not go. It was not allowed. We could hardly ask her what would happen if an English person just got on a boat and went. We had, anyhow, to get on a boat first. . . .

Baku derives its name from a Persian word, 'Badkube', meaning the mount of winds, which name suits it admirably, for it suffers from north winds all the year round. A violent north-north-west wind sweeps it in winter, and in spite of the suffocating summers the temperature drops when a north wind sets in. The average number of cloudy days in Baku is given as fifty per cent.

The Persians, who are believed to have founded the city in the fifth or sixth century, under Kubad I, appear to have lost it to the Arabs in the seventh century. There are traces of ninth and tenth century architecture in the old town. The city was conquered by the Persians and Turks alternately during the succeeding centuries, and finally came to rest in the hands of the Russians in the early nineteenth century. Its industrial growth

began in 1870 with the development of its oil-fields. To-day the new town, with its petroleum refineries and factories for oil-fuel, is like a rising tide creeping slowly but surely up the hill of the old town, and in a few years' time will have completely inundated the mazes of narrow streets, the old walls, Persian mosques, minarets, squat, square houses with dome-shaped roofs, and all that romantic Orientalism which is anathema to the controlling forces of the U.S.S.R. Doubtless a bit of old wall here, a mosque there, will be left, like the seventeenth-century Gate of the Shah Abbas, which is now part of the Square of Red Youth, not so much for history's sake as a reminder of the barbarism from which the city has been retrieved. An extract from a Russian guide illustrates the attitude: "In the Soviet period the city has considerably increased and has been rebuilt and embellished with many gardens and squares; old streets are partly destroyed, newly planned and enlarged and planted with trees. Throughout there is electricity and canalization. In the night, especially by moon-shine, mixed with the electrical light, the city is wonderful."

Neither from the point of view of romanticism or of the correct Party attitude could anyone, I submit, say fairer than that.

The 'Maiden's Tower', or Kis-Kale, was once part of the fortifications of old Baku, which used to be entirely surrounded by walls and a moat. The tower is now used as a lighthouse. Legend has it that this squat stone tower was built by her father at the request of an unhappy young girl who flung herself from it rather than give up her lover. Across the road from it is a mosque, and a collection of old houses with dome-shaped roofs. Tier upon tier the ramshackle old town rises behind, like the old town of Tiflis, the narrow, cobbled streets in some parts mere alleyways, not wide enough for a car to pass through. Outside low white-washed houses women sit on the ground, leaning against the walls; some of them are veiled. In courtyards between the houses camels stand, like a sneering challenge to Westernization. Some of the houses are the most appalling tumbledown shacks; our guide tells us that many of them are private property left over from the Tsarist regime, and that the people cannot be persuaded to vacate them and move into the fine new workers' dwellings of the new town. She is very

eloquent about the socialisation of the Persian women. Before the Soviet campaign for their emancipation they had been cruelly repressed, the mere chattels of men, in the Eastern fashion; now, unveiled, educated, socially and morally freed, they rise to high positions in the state, taking their place as 'useful Soviet citizens'. They are very intelligent, she declares, with a flair for mathematics; many become doctors and engineers. . . . There had been, she says, many murders of women when the campaign for their emancipation began. Those who put aside the veil were called harlots by the men, and in many cases wives and daughters had been killed by husbands and fathers who preferred to see their womenfolk dead rather than this shameful Westernization overtake them. But today in Baku there is a museum showing the emancipation of Persian women. She strongly urges that we should go to see it. Today the Persian woman, instead of lying on the floor in child-birth, as she had been forced to before her emancipation, being regarded at such times as unclean, now goes into hospital and has proper treatment and is taught mothercraft. She is also, at clinics, taught birth-control and personal hygiene, and her children are educated in the schools and trained to be free and 'useful Soviet citizens'. . . .

During this narration emancipated and unemancipated women passed us; women with shawls drawn across the lower part of their faces; women in European dress; women struggled on to the rocking, shabby street-cars, sharing in the free fight with the men, and women squatted idly on the ground, their faces hidden, as indifferent to all this socialization—with its machines, its seven-hour working day, its social and political consciousness—as the camels flicking the flies from their mangy hides. . . .

The East is so old. The West is a young thing, rushing around full of new ideas and enthusiasm for saving the world through the machine, hygiene, education. For centuries the East has survived without civilisation in these terms. It has centuries of its own vast civilisation behind it. It was civilised when the West was still a swamp, and the people of the West wore the skins of animals and lived in caves.

Is it so great an achievement for a woman to uncover her face and go out into the world and stand beside a machine?

Reactionary? If you like. In this matter of the socialisation of Eastern peoples I am—if to be in favour of leaving the East alone is to be reactionary.

At the top of the hill of Baku's old town terrace gardens are being constructed on what is little more than a rubbish heap. Here are minosa bushes, pergolas with climbing roses, cafés, accommodation for open-air concerts, rockeries, flights of steps, benches looking out over the wide Baku Bay; it is all very charming, and much appreciated, we were told, on hot summer evenings, for, in the absence of that north wind, there was always a pleasant breeze up there. These gardens, our guide assured us, were only possible as a result of 'constant irritation'. That is to say the flower-beds and shrubs and trees had to be watered twice a day. . . . Baku is badly off as regards water-supply, and has also very little vegetation, so that, altogether, these gardens represent a considerable achievement.

A fine broad boulevard has been constructed along by the sea, and this, together with the fine sweep of the bay, makes it not unlike the Bay of Naples. There are even the factory chimneys in the near distance. . . . Behind the boulevard are some well laid-out gardens, with tamarisks and flower-beds, shady walks, and benches, and behind the gardens blocks of modern flats with pink walls.

The new town of Baku has good shops and municipal buildings; there are several good food stores, and shops selling such luxury goods as flowers—chrysanthemums in pots, tied up with pink and white paper bows, and hideous magenta, purple, and orange plush catkins, for the most part—wines, perfumes, confectionery, fancy goods. It is a good 'serviceable' sort of town, commercial but without that depressing greyness of commerciality which characterises Kiev, Kharkhov, and Rostov. It has none of the handsomeness of Tiflis, and, like Naples, looks its best from its bay.

As it turned out, Donia and I had ample opportunity for studying it from that angle.

XXI

TICKETS FOR TURKESTAN

WE were much exercised in our minds by a dread that when we attempted to leave the hotel, Intourist zeal would insist on conveying us by car to the house of the friends to whom we were supposed to be going. We decided that we had better be ready to meet such a contingency, and equip ourselves with an address to which, if need be, we must allow ourselves to be taken. We developed the idea that if we could quote an address just round the corner we should be allowed to set out for it on foot.

"They'll want to send a porter with us to carry our rucksacks."

"We'll pretend they're a mere nothing—swing them lightly to our shoulders and stroll negligently away."

"You know how heavy they are——"

"We could manage a negligent manner for the hundred yards till we turn the corner."

We felt that we must also be able to answer the possible question as to why we did not go to this address in the first place, instead of driving all round the city trying to get into any hotel but the Intourist one. Well—our friends did not meet us at the airport as we had expected, and when we called at their apartment we found they were away. How do we know that they are back in Baku now? Oh, we met them in the street. Or they telephoned the hotel. Dammit, we are not going to be cross-examined like this; surely we can leave the hotel when we please, without accounting for our comings and goings?

But I knew in my heart that it was better to have a story ready for any emergency. So much—everything—depended on nothing going wrong at this stage, and we are already open to suspicion by having been caught lying about being unable to get into the Intourist hotel.

Another dread was that our passports would be detained until such time as we declared we were leaving Baku—when we should no doubt be asked where we were going next. Well, if they would not return us our passports to go to friends', they must be told that we were going to Batum—we were due to go there, anyhow, according to Voks' arrangements. It was all very worrying, but it was no use declaring even our intention of leaving the hotel until we had found out about boats.

Accordingly, on the third day, we set out for the docks. The cobbled road by the quays swarmed with people, standing about in groups, sitting on their boxes and bundles, forming queues for the inquiry office, for the newspaper stall, for kiosks selling eatables. Warehouses on the other side of the road were disgorging crates and bales. Above the sheds opposite the funnels of steamers thrust up. We joined a small queue for the inquiry office and learned that there was a steamer for Krasnovodsk that evening, with the gratuitous information that there was a queue about a mile long waiting for tickets already. The queue was across the road, round the corner. No, there wasn't another steamer tomorrow evening. In two or three days' time? Perhaps. There was no regular service at this time of the year.

We found the queue easily enough. It appeared to occupy most of one side of the street. And it was not so much a queue as a great crowd which completely covered the pavement and overflowed into the road. A number of people were sitting on bundles in the gutter. Shawled women with handkerchief-covered heads stood their ground against the wall with an air of eternal fixity. They would, you felt, wait for ever if need be.

Donia made various inquiries as to who was the last person in the queue, and having found him, a poorly dressed youth wearing an astrachan hat, we grouped ourselves behind him.

Donia made the necessary 'contacts' with those in front and behind in order to establish ourselves in the queue, then

went away to buy newspapers and a few apples with which to pass the time. We were no longer at the tail of the queue by the time she returned, though she was gone only a few minutes. When after some time the queue showed no signs of movement we began to make inquiries—and discovered that the distribution of tickets had not yet begun.

" How long shall we have to wait ? "

" Not long."

Donia persisted. " About how long ? "

" Till the evening."

It was then noon.

When the first shock had worn off, Donia tried again.

" Shall we all get tickets, do you think ? "

" Have you put your name down ? "

" No."

" Some people put their names down yesterday."

" Oh, my God ! " That was an aside in English.

Then in Russian, patiently : " To whom does one give one's name ? "

" To the comrade there in the green cap."

We found the comrade in the green cap. He was near the head of the queue, and a swarm of people buzzed about him, clamorously, all shouting at once.

He had a stub of pencil and several scraps of greasy-looking paper, which he kept turning over and over, confusedly, as different people kept demanding as to whether he had their names down.

Donia began giving our names, when suddenly it dawned on us both that it was all quite futile. When the ticket office opened what official was going to trouble to decipher the illegible names on those greasy bits of paper ?

She said severely : " What is the use of bits of paper like that ? You've probably lost half of them already, and you can't read them, and nobody else is going to try. You ought to have a book and do it all properly ! "

This suggestion was received with great acclaim by the crowd. There were angry cries of " That's true ! " " Why don't you take our names down properly ? " " Why don't you get a book ? " " Why don't you have a proper list ? "

The man in the cap replied to these protests by removing himself to another part of the queue.

We returned to our own places and spreading newspapers on the kerb sat down for a little while, till it occurred to us that having established our places in the queue we might as well leave it for an hour or so. We decided to go back to the hotel and get a meal, and discover a suitable address round the corner.

We investigated the pink blocks of flats; it was important to know the name of the street a given block was in, its number, and which apartment of those indicated on the notice-board in the entrance hall was our friends'. . . . Equipped with this information, that is to say, having settled the name and apartment number and correct postal address of our imaginary friends, we went on to the hotel and ate that afternoon meal which is early luncheon for Russians. We spent about two hours in this way, and then decided that we might as well stroll back to the docks and find out how the queue was getting on. Nothing, we supposed, would have happened, but it was just as well, perhaps, to look it up, to establish the fact that we still had places in it.

To our amazement we got back to find half of it gone. We dashed frenziedly up and down, the way a dog does when it has lost its master, and finally found some people near the head of the queue who remembered us, and who vouched for the fact that our turn had come and gone, so that we were now justified in taking our places at the head of the queue. There were some protests about this, but they were over-ruled.

One of our staunchest defenders was a tall, blond, broad-shouldered man of about thirty who, because he wore a blue and white striped gilet, faded blue dungarees, a white peaked cap, we nicknamed 'the Sailor'. He had bright blue eyes and a pleasant smile. He told us that there were now only fourth-class places left on the boat. We were foolish to have left our places in the queue for so long, he said. We asked whether we were likely to get fourth-class places. Yes, he thought so. One could generally manage to get fourth-class places. It meant travelling 'deck', of course, we realised that? What did travelling 'deck' mean? That you had no shelter, and no place to lie down—except on the deck. It was not so bad if one had brought bedding. He looked at our rucksacks and

smiled. Perhaps, he said, when we were aboard we should be able to transfer. We hoped so. Devoutly we hoped so. But better fourth class than not to get aboard at all.

When at last our turn came to pass into the booking-hall, we found another queue inside. Militia guarded the doors. At the booking window, when we finally reached it, Donia inquired if it was possible to get second or first class. First and second were all gone, she was told; a number of delegates travelling had caused a run on them; we might try for third; if we got them we should return the fourth-class tickets. Inquiry at the next window elicited the same information about first and second, and all third-class places were sold, but we might try on the boat. . . .

We paid ten roubles each for our fourth-class places, which at the rate at which we had changed our money meant half a crown each.

When we came out of the booking-hall we saw the man in the striped gilet leaning against a wall, munching a piece of bread. He smiled and called to us, asking if we got places. We told him yes, fourth, and he laughed. We should need to bring some food along for the journey, he said, and it was as well to be at the docks an hour before the steamer was due to sail. He would look out for us.

He seemed to be a very helpful 'sailor'.

The afternoon was wearing on, and we had still a lot to do. We had to get back to the hotel, settle our bill, recover our passports; then get back to the docks and dump our rucksacks in the baggage room; then we had to go shopping.

At the hotel we announced boldly that we were leaving almost at once and would like our bill and our passports.

There was some discussion as to whether we should be allowed to use the food-tickets intended for Erivain and Batum instead of paying for the meals. There was some telephoning, and a number of people were brought into the discussion. I have forgotten now how it ended; I know that all I cared about was recovering our passports and getting out of the hotel. Once we had our passports they should bicker to their heart's content over anything and everything. The passports were handed back, but it was pointed out that our visas needed renewing.

Yes, we knew, we said; we would see to it; we had not forgotten. We paid our bill, said, no, we did not need a porter for our baggage, we had only rucksacks. . . .

Downstairs in the hall the porter asked, did we not want the car? No, no; we were not going far, only round the corner, and our rucksacks were so light. In proof of which we swung them to our shoulders, smiling, insouciant.

The porter looked at us doubtfully, but wishing him *Dosvedanye*, we marched away out of the doorway and into the street. The porter came to the doorway and watched us till we turned the corner. We had had the feeling that, dissatisfied with our irregular mode of departure, not at all befitting two English tourists, he would watch us, and glancing back, we saw him standing there regarding us, we thought, with suspicion. Our rucksacks were very heavy, but we strode briskly down the street.

"Leave one arm swinging—don't clutch at both straps as though your back's breaking."

"It is, pretty near."

"So's mine, but we've got to keep up that nonchalant air. Swing along, like this—whistling—as though you were just off for a jolly hike with nothing more than your mac and a bite of lunch in your rucksack. And don't keep looking back like that—it looks so suspicious."

"He's coming after us. I believe he's going to follow us".

"We'll go into those gardens. We can soon give him the slip with all those paths and bushes."

We marched into the gardens and proceeded to lose ourselves in a maze of paths. When we finally dumped our rucksacks and collapsed on to a bench our backs and arms felt like breaking. But we had lost the hotel porter.

When we had recovered breath we limped along slowly and painfully towards the docks. There was now no need for maintaining a nonchalant air.

In the dock road we found the same crowds as in the morning. We queued up at the baggage-room to dispose of our baggage, then set off for the shops. We bought bread, sausage, butter, cheese, and a bottle of water. We made our purchases in Torgsin because it appeared to be the best stores. We paid in English

money and were given our change in Polish and American coins. That was always the snag about shopping in Torgsin.

Back at the docks we queued up to redeem our baggage, and struggling with it out of the hot tiny room packed with similarly struggling humanity, saw the 'sailor'. He came over and greeted us, and relieved us of our rucksacks, and we followed him across the road and into the dockside waiting-hall, which was like a railway station waiting-room, with rows of benches, the usual immense portrait of Stalin draped with red, and the familiar overpowering heat and smell. The place was packed, but we found places on a bench after some of the people sitting there had been persuaded to place some of their bundles on the floor. Everyone except ourselves appeared to have bundles of bedding. There were large tea-kettles everywhere, and numerous balalaikas. Old women sat huddled up in their shawls. Young women brazenly bared immense breasts to suckle their young. One woman had her baby tied to her back. It cried piteously, and its little legs appeared to be twisted most uncomfortably in the scarf that bound it to its mother. It had red-rimmed eyes and sores round its mouth. The mother kept patting its behind, and smiling. Finally she untied it and clapped it to her breast to keep it quiet. Men in huge shaggy sheepskin hats sat together, staring vacantly, themselves like a flock of sheep. There were a number of flat Mongolian faces, and a number of women with their shawls drawn across their faces. There was a feeling of the East drawing near.

We waited in this heat and smell for two hours, then a syren sounded and instantly the whole room was on its feet, rushing down gangways, climbing over benches, pushing, struggling, shoving. Militia with pistols at their hips sprang on to benches and shouted, *Tovarishchi, Tovarishchi,* appealing to the mob to leave their places in orderly fashion, one bench at a time. But the syren proved not to be from the Krasnovodsk steamer after all, and everyone returned to their places, some complaining, some laughing. When they had all settled down again the militia made another appeal for orderliness when the time came to leave the hall. But when the syren sounded again, there was the same mad stampede. This time the warning was for the Krasnovodsk passengers, and the rabble vigorously fought its

way to the exit in spite of the bedding, bundles, tea-kettles, babies, with which it was burdened. There was a scuffle with the militia when a man tried to break through without a ticket. He was literally thrown back into the hall.

It was heaven to get out into the night-air of the quayside. A long queue stretched from the waiting-room exit to the shabby looking little steamer lying alongside. We were some time covering the short distance to the ship, and an old man behind, almost hidden under the bedding he carried on his back, kept complaining that whereas we all queued up like good comrades, as the militia told us to, people who had not queued up at all had got on board first, and were taking all the good places. . . .

Whilst we were still standing in the queue the ' sailor ' loomed up out of the darkness, coming towards us from the ship. He had got places for us, he said, up in the bows; he would look for us there.

He was certainly being a very kind ' sailor '.

When at last we descended the gang-plank into the ship's lower deck, an officer standing at the bottom of the steps asked sharply, as we turned left to go to the bows, " What class are you? "

He stared at us when Donia answered fourth.

We climbed a perpendicular flight of steps flanked on either side by latrines from whose portholes came the most incredible stench, and came out into the bows. Every inch of deck space appeared to be covered already with humanity and its bedding.

The blue and white stripes emerged again through the dusk. He led us to a place beside the anchor chains. There was just sufficient space for our rucksacks. We sat down, pushing our rucksacks a little backwards, a little forwards, a little to the right, a little to the left; prostrate bodies moved slightly, uncomfortably, grumbling. But they moved. Soon we had space enough to stretch out at full length. We shoved our rucksacks into the gutter under the rail. They would serve as pillows. We spread our leather coats out not so much as potential bedding but to stake our claim in the deck space, then stood up and leaned on the rail, looking at the lights of Baku jewelling the invisible hills, and thinking, " We're off ! "

But that is precisely where we were mistaken.

CASPIAN SEA INTERLUDE: FOURTH CLASS

CASPIAN SEA INTERLUDE:

FOURTH CLASS

FOR nearly three hours we lay out in the Bay with engine trouble. When we dropped anchor there was a fierce rattling of the great chains and a panic-stricken flight on the part of the people encamped between them. Every now and then there was the heavy vibration of the propeller sending a shudder through the deck—and those who lay on it. All round people grumbled, joked, dozed, or lay on their mattresses patiently staring at the stars. On one side of the bay there was the red glow of furnaces, and long plumes of smoke unfurling against the warm grey-blue of the sky. Baku itself was like a great jewelled brooch.

The ship itself, viewed from the bows, presented a fantastic sight. The deck-space of the bows and amidships was a solid mass of humanity. But the mass did not look as though it was composed of human beings, but of closely packed bundles of rags. The hatch covering the hold was completely hidden by the bundles. The sheltered first-class deck was completely empty.

The freedom of the ship for all classes which is a feature of the London to Leningrad steamers does not prevail on the Caspian Sea steamers, which do not cater for tourist traffic. The Communist answer to this is that if you are not a tourist, valuable to the country for the money you bring to it, or a commissar, or a delegate, or a Red Army officer, you should not be travelling, but staying at home and getting on with your job.

If you insist on travelling you must put up with whatever conditions operate, because at present the U.S.S.R. is not catering for passenger traffic other than for tourists, being fully occupied with providing adequate transport for goods. All this is reasonable enough, but does not seem to me any reason why those unfortunates compelled to travel fourth class—either from lack of money or lack of accommodation elsewhere—should not at least be allowed to lie under cover on the first-class deck, what time the privileged first-class passengers lie snug in their cabins. I have been assured that 'the better-dressed' fourth-class passengers are permitted to transfer to more sheltered parts of the deck, but it is surely extraordinary, to say the least of it, if in a Communist country one must have the appearance of respectability before being permitted to avail oneself of available shelter. There is the danger of vermin being transferred to the first-class deck, of course, if the 'rabble' are allowed to utilise it indiscriminately, but I can only say that Donia and I lay for thirty-six hours amongst the ragged and unwashed and collected neither bug nor louse. The principle of this discrimination is, anyhow, I submit, all wrong in a country aiming at social equality.

It is highly probable that had Donia and I gone to the captain and explained that we were foreigners, shown our papers, we should have been provided at least with shelter; but with visas which would expire in a day or two, no permits for Turkestan, and travelling on bootleg roubles, we were in no position to call attention to ourselves, still less show our papers. It is possible that the captain might not have been acquainted with the regulations concerning foreigners in Turkestan, but we could not afford to take the chance; being safely aboard the ship it seemed more expedient to us to lie low until we got not merely to the other side of the Caspian, but safely through Turkestan and out the other side.

It was a relief when at last we were under way. The open sea which awaited us outside the Bay was smooth as a pond. The night was warm, and blazing with stars. I have never seen such a brilliance of stars. I lay on my back staring at them and thinking that all the foulness and discomfort of this ship could not detract from their splendour. On one side of me lay Donia,

vainly trying to pretend that her rolled-up leather-coat was a mattress; beyond her lay two Persian women with ornamental head-dresses and long black plaits hanging down over their shoulders. One kept her black veil drawn across her face; the other, a magnificent creature in bedraggled red velvet, allowed her white veil to float freely. Both spat a great deal, with searching, raucous clearings of the throat. One of them had a rag doll bound by a sash to her stomach.

On my other side lay a thin, ragged Russian lad of about fifteen or sixteen. He had no overcoat and no bedding. He lay with his head on a tin box, and protected one side of his face with a cloth cap pulled down over it. The smell of him was past belief. Beyond him lay a lad a little older; he had a hard dry cough, and coughed and spat all through the night. At my feet lay a man who wore an astrachan hat and who had a straw basket full of dried fish. He had a mattress and some rugs and lay buried out of sight. Beyond him, between the chains, a youngish man and woman lay cuddled up together on their mattress, sleeping as peacefully and intimately as though they were in bed at home. Beyond the two lads, under the boats, lay an old couple, humped on their sides.

During the night the lad next to me began snuggling closer, whimpering a little. I shoved him off. When he repeated the performance, I roused Donia.

"Tell this kid to lay off," I pleaded, irritably. "The smell of him's enough without being expected to cuddle him!"

Donia sat up and spoke to the lad.

"What is it, *Tovarich?* Keep to your own place." Her tone was kind but firm.

The boy sprang up, and stood cowering over us, shivering violently, and jabbering. He looked like a little thin scarecrow standing there in the dim light, his feet planted in that tatterdemalion confusion of humanity.

"He says you've stolen his spoon," Donia translated. "He says you've got it in your pocket."

"Mad or drunk," I said, wearily. "Mad, I should think, by the look of him. And I wish his ghastly brother would stop coughing and gobbing just for five minutes."

"He's dreaming, I think," Donia said, and addressed him

again, urging him to go and lie down in his own place and try to sleep.

He whimpered that he hadn't a place to go to, and that he was cold. The other lad wakened then and called to him, and the wretched little creature slunk back to his place. I was ashamed; he was only a kid, I thought, no older than my own child; I might have let him snuggle closer, getting what warmth he could from my own more warmly clad and better-fed body. . . . I might—but for that awful sour-sweet smell of dirt.

The hardness of the deck became almost intolerable as the hours wore on. I pulled a sweater out of my rucksack and made a wad to go under my hip-bone when lying on my side, but after a time deck and bone united again in one excruciating ache. To roll over and lie on one's back was merely to transfer the ache to one's spine. Sitting up one discovered the bones in one's buttocks. Standing up was a temporary relief, but the pre-dawn wind was cold and one could not stand for long. Lying on one's face served for a little while, but that way one was more acutely aware of the smell of dried fish, garlic, feet, and unwashed human bodies. In the end there was nothing for it but to lie on one's back and wait for the dawn. Why miseries and discomforts should seem more tolerable in daylight it is hard to say, but the fact remains that there is a certain measure of relief when 'came the dawn'.

The stars were a great comfort. I had the feeling that nightmare as this journey was I should always remember those stars and be glad to have seen them. That ship never floats now into my mind without I see it against a brilliant back-cloth of stars. Twice I saw shooting stars. The innate superstition which in daylight I strenuously deny asserted itself. Shooting stars are lucky, I told myself, that means we shall get to Samarkand.

The brilliance of the stars faded, imperceptibly, as though transparent grey veils were drawn over them, one after another, so that they grew dimmer and dimmer, and finally faded out into the dawn-grey of the sky itself. One very big and bright star was the last to go. Even in full daylight it persisted, the morning star, serene and lovely and unquenchable.

Though the stars faded slowly, the daylight came suddenly.

There was no splendid flaming dawn, only the folding back of the darkness like a curtain drawn aside, and the fading of the stars, and the final surrender of that burning morning star. Then full day was on us, and on the grey, empty sea a marked swell.

As though they had been called, all the bundles of humanity began stirring in this abrupt termination of night. They sat up, stretching, looking about them, calling to each other, fumbling with their bundles, bringing out hunks of bread, unearthing tea-kettles.

The little scarecrow of the night sprang up, beating his thin body with his arms to warm himself, looking out over the sea, eagerly. He was, I discovered, a bright-looking lad. I smiled at him, wondering how much of the incidents of the night he remembered, and he smiled back, pleasantly, and said something which I did not understand, but to which another smile appeared to be an adequate answer. In daylight he was just an ordinary human boy.

I leaned over the huddle that was Donia.

" Shall we make tea ? " I suggested brightly.

She looked at me balefully. " How *can* you ? " she demanded, and buried her face inside her coat again.

I was so abashed that for a few moments I lay leaning against my rucksack wondering whether I felt ill myself, so great is the power of auto-suggestion. Whilst I was as it were sounding myself, one of the Persian women began to retch most monstrously and to vomit into the holes from which the anchor-chains emerged. Her companion promptly began to vomit through a scupper, and there were frightful sounds of retching from behind. Like the waking it all began as though at a command. It might have been done to numbers, so automatic and simultaneous was it. Men sitting up on their bundles and seeing the vomiting women laughed and called to each other, jerking their heads in the direction of the women. Someone began to strum a balalaika and to sing. From another part of the deck came the music of a gramophone. The sound of the sea was audible now. The man with the dried fish began to vomit horribly. The Persian women moaned between their bouts, making horrible animal noises, their veils drawn across their

faces, their bodies rocking to and fro. I now noticed that under their full skirts they wore long red trousers tucked into their boots.

I stayed until the sun was up, wondering whether I felt sick or not, and then, resolutely, sat up and fished bread and sausage out of my rucksack. I discovered that I was hungry. With a jack-knife I cut the bread into neat slices, buttered it, and detached some of the lumps of fat from the sausage.

Donia, moving her position, caught a glimpse of me, and turned away in disgust. But though I felt intensely sorry for her, and ashamed at being able to enjoy anything whilst she felt ill, undeniably the bread and sausage tasted good in the morning air, and as to the vomiting going on all around, one got used to that; it became merely part of the noise of the sea and the smell of the ship.

The morning freshness departed both from the day and from my spirits, however, as the hours dragged past. The sky clouded over, the swell increased—and up in the bows we had the full benefit of the ship's every motion. The hours seemed interminable. Every bone in one's body seemed to ache from the hardness of the deck. I climbed up on to some baggage behind me and lay there, until the owner of it wanted to lie on it himself. It was hard and lumpy, but a feather-mattress compared with the deck. I repacked my rucksack, taking out the hard things, to make it serve for a cushion to sit on, and rested my back against someone else's bundles. The owner of the bundles was similarly propped up on the other side; so long as he remained in that position I was all right.

One of the Persian women had a swollen face. She began to tell me all about it. I nodded and made sympathetic faces, and she was satisfied with my response. She sat nursing her face hour after hour. And hour after hour Donia lay wretchedly by the rail, and I sat on my bundle with someone else's bundle behind my back, and people laughed, talked, vomited, sang, played the balalaika, the gramophone, ate, made tea, made jokes, made love, slept, climbed over each other's bodies to get to the stinking latrines amidships, planting their feet under each other's armpits, between shoulder and neck, beneath each other's legs —for there was literally not an inch of deck-space not occupied

by some part of human anatomy or its worldly goods—hour after hour, and all the time a heaving, grey empty sea.

Towards afternoon as the weary day dragged along I found myself thinking how fantastic it all was, to be huddled here on this dirty deck, eating bread and sausage like any peasant woman, surrounded by strange Asiatic faces, one of this raggle-taggle ship's company ploughing a forbidden way across the Caspian. Friends would be coming out of the Ivy Restaurant, out of the Savoy Grill, out of the Café Royal, and some of them might be saying, ' Heard anything of Ethel lately ? ' and making jokes about Darkest Russia, and bidding each other ring up sometime, and making arrangements to meet at parties, and getting into taxis, and strolling away down Piccadilly. And the red 'buses would be going round, and the black-shawled women crouching by Eros selling violets, selling gardenias, and men in the gutter offering orchids, lilies-of-the-valley, and Etam's stocking-shop full of pink silk underclothes, and luncheon being cleared away in suburban homes, and the sultriness of afternoon settling down on the privet hedges, and people in offices settling down, a little somnolently after lunch, and wondering how soon the afternoon tea would come round . . . and this tramp of a steamer ploughing on . . . hour after hour after hour.

Word had gone round that we should arrive five hours late, that is, about eight in the evening. But the official who came round for tickets in mid-afternoon, climbing over our bodies to get to us, informed us that we should not be in till two the next morning.

Another night to get through ! One had only got through the weary day by counting the hours till the evening. With the prospect of another nightmare night to go through something in oneself lay down and died.

Several times during the day the ' sailor ' climbed over the bodies and stood over us suggesting that we should go and lie in the third-class ; he would give up his place to us, he said. We thanked him but said that we preferred the air. We had had a look at the inside of the ship when searching for cleaner latrines than the unspeakably disgusting places amidships, and the heat was like that of an engine-room, and the stench such as only human beings can produce.

The 'sailor' seemed rather angry at our refusal. We were very foolish, he said; we had another night to go through, and we were running into a storm; what would happen to us if a storm came on? We should be soaked to the skin. . . .

We remained stubbornly on deck until a wind blew up and the sea rose, then gave in and climbed over the bodies to go below. It was with the greatest of difficulty, with the ship pitching and rolling, that we did not tread on people's faces. Once we had to climb over a chest along by the rail, the bodies below being so closely packed that it was impossible to insinuate a foot even under an arm-pit or the hollow of a neck. At the top of the steps leading to the lower deck the smell from the portholes of the latrines struck one in the face like a blow. A few yards across from these cess-pools was a buffet at which boiling water and a variety of hard, sweet scone, could be obtained. This lower deck was as closely packed as the bows; it was more sheltered than the bows, but there was the smell of the latrines to contend with. Nobody, however, seemed to mind; women suckled their babies, made tea, divided out food; men leaned against the rail and the steps and chatted; men and women lay asleep on the top of the hatch; the deck was strewn with mattresses, bodies, bundles, tea-kettles; a gramophone was grinding out a jazz tune; some children were dodging in and out of the doors leading through the heat to the second-class cabins.

We descended a steep flight of steps and came into the prison-like grimness and stinking heat of the third-class. It was like those interior scenes of slave-ships or criminal galleys one sees in films like Ben-Hur, or reads of in Devil's Island stories. It appeared to be composed completely of wood, painted a repulsive khaki colour. All round the sides, and in a block in the centre of the saloon, were wooden shelves, devoid of bedding. It was, in fact, very much like the hard compartment on a train—even to the dirty bare feet sticking out over the ends of the berths.

Our companion conducted us to a sort of wide table at the far end of the saloon upon which some half-dozen people already lay in a row. Between an old woman and a bearded man stripped to his hairy waist was a small space. We dumped our rucksacks and climbed up on to the table. The old woman and the bearded

man moved over a little and we both managed to squeeze into the space.

The old woman moaned softly at intervals with rheumatism. She told me all about it, and though I understood not one word I made sympathetic faces and noises, and the conversation was a success. The bearded man was delighted to find that Donia could speak Russian. He himself was a Persian. He was very affable and friendly, and occasionally broke into snatches of song. He scratched his hairy chest a good deal, and there was the familiar sickly sour-sweet smell. Gallantly he offered Donia a share in the dirty blanket which covered him up to the waist. She excused herself saying that she felt too hot as it was, and sat up, leaning against the wooden wall behind. Presently, to my amazement, for she was still not feeling well, she dragged her sketch-book out of her rucksack and began to draw. . . .

I lay watching a fat red cockroach wandering along the edge of the table. Some children romping up and down the gangway between the centre berths had bad outbreaks of impetigo on their faces. I spotted another cockroach on the end of the berth opposite, and moving to make myself more comfortable all but touched one which ran out between my rucksack and the bundles of the old woman.

There was no feeling of the ship's movements down here, and after a while one grew used to the heat and smell, and I sat up and got out our kettle and spirit-stove and proceeded to make tea, sending the 'sailor', who had been hanging around for some time, watching Donia sketch, and being himself sketched, to get some boiling water.

Once again the dried milk and the Meta-fuel which we burned in the little stove attracted attention, and we had to pass the tin of milk and the Meta-fuel tablets round the saloon for inspection. The saccharine tablets were also a source of interest, and there was the usual amusement over the size of our kettle.

The 'sailor' finally came to us and said we must pay a supplement of fifteen roubles on our tickets for transferring to the third-class, and that he must take the money now to the ticket-collector.

When he had collected it from us, I remarked thoughtfully to Donia, "Do you suppose he gave this place up to us—or merely sold it to us for fifteen roubles?"

Donia, who was already wishing she hadn't drunk that tea, replied irritably that she couldn't see that it mattered.

"I don't trust him," I persisted.

"He's very kind."

"Yes. But why should he be?"

But Donia had other matters on her mind, and the hot long hours dragged slowly over us.

PART II

TURKESTAN

RUSSIAN TURKESTAN

I

KRASNOVODSK: THE KAZAKS

WE arrived at Krasnovodsk in the dark, and following the crowd up from the quayside came to the railway station, where already a queue had formed at the booking-office. The buffet opposite was closed. We tried to find out what time the train for Samarkand left, but no one knew.

We waited, I suppose, rather less than an hour for tickets, and were congratulating ourselves on having achieved them remarkably quickly, when the 'sailor' pointed out to us that they were only tickets permitting us to board the train; we had to get place tickets later, and the booking-office for that was not yet open.

We went into the waiting-room and tried to find a bench to lie on, till it should be light, and booking-office and buffet open, but all were occupied; so too were all the chairs drawn up to a long table down the middle of the room, and there was very little floor-space left. People slept stretched full length on the benches, they slept with their heads on the table, they slept lying on their bundles on the floor, as they had on the ship's deck.

Feeling that we could not lie on another hard-surface yet awhile we deposited our rucksacks and wandered away to find a washing-place. We found a place—a long stone trough with jets of water emitted from thin pipes jutting above. The difficulty was to keep the supply of water going with one hand and wash with the other. There were a number of people rinsing their

hands and splashing water over their faces, and we did likewise. Looking for a W.C. we wandered up a flight of stone steps and came to a mother's rest-room; in a room adjoining were a number of cots; several women sat there with their babies. The latrine was, as we had feared, the gruesome-looking place round the corner from this building, surrounded by an evil smell and humming with flies. When we first opened the rickety door we instantly retreated in dismay. Holes in the ground we were used to by this time, but it was our first experience of holes in the ground in a row, and with another row opposite, and not a vestige of a division or screen of any kind. There were a number of women squatting. In addition to the indecency the whole place was indescribably filthy.

"It's impossible!"

"There's nowhere else."

"I should be too inhibited. . . ."

But you cannot 'inhibit' in these matters for days on end, and in time we were both too exhausted, and too inured to this sort of filth and degradation, to be squeamish any more. We never quite got used to it, but in the matter of usage we had no choice.

(At this point the sensitive reader may be moved to protest that there are altogether too many bad smells and mentions of latrines in the latter part of this book. I am sorry, because there are, I fear, a lot more to come. Bad smells and filthy primitive latrines became very much part of our lives, and you, dear reader, when you began this book, started out with us on this long and arduous journey, and what you sit back in comfort and read of with disgust we were compelled to endure in reality with an even greater disgust. Why should we spare your imagination the mere echo of what our weary flesh had to suffer at first-hand? Our rewards will be yours too, if you will but bear with us . . . we found beauty all right, though we had literally to pick our way through ordure to get to it.)

We walked about until it began to get light, shuffling wearily through deep dust, and making out the white-washed ghostliness of houses and walls, grateful at least for the air, and the fact that our limbs were not stretched on boards. It was not cold, and day came quickly.

We returned to the station, then, and hung about with a number of other travellers waiting for the buffet to open.

When at last it did open we sat for over half an hour waiting, because the tea was not ready, and, apparently, could not be got ready under that time. (We had similar experiences on other Russian railway stations.) There was a good deal of grumbling, but the waitresses appeared to be quite indifferent. It was the usual dingy waiting-room, full of plants tied up with paper bows, swarms of flies, the red-draped picture of Stalin, and a few beggar children snatching scraps of bread from the tables when the waitresses' backs were turned.

Some Red Army officers at a table near by regarded us with interest, and were obviously talking and laughing about us. They remarked loud enough for us to hear that it was forbidden to bring baggage into the buffet. We pretended not to understand. If asked our nationality by anyone we intended to be Belgian—a nice neutral nationality, we decided. We were very nervous, wondering how much the Red Army knew about the regulations concerning foreigners in Turkestan. We were very jumpy and on edge. In Baku we had thought we should feel safe once aboard the steamer. Now we were impatient to be aboard the train. In my heart I knew I should not feel safe till we were actually in Samarkand.

The pale yellow hot water that passed as tea did not do much to revive us. We were very exhausted from our two nights on deck, and hoped against hope that we should be able to get soft places on the train for the three days' and nearly three nights' journey to Samarkand. We wandered about the station trying to get information as to *platz-kartes*, and the time the train left, but no one seemed to know anything, the railway officials least of all. One official suggested that we should go to the station-master and explain that we were foreigners, when, he said, we should be given soft places without having to queue up. We had, he said, only to show our papers. . . . We could not explain to him that that was the last thing we wished to do.

Outside the station people sat about on their bundles on the pavement. The steps of a building nearby were crowded and a queue seemed to be forming. We thought we had better find out what was happening, as we still had *platz-kartes* to get, but

when at last we succeeded in getting inside the building the heat was so intense, and there were such swarms of flies, and such a smell, that we came out again. *Platz-kartes* were being given out here, someone said. But someone else said that they weren't, that it was no use queueing up there for places.

We were too tired to stand in a queue for what would probably be the whole of the morning merely on the off-chance, so we joined, instead, a short queue for the baggage-room, dumped our rucksacks and wandered away. So far as we could gather the train was due to arrive some time between eleven o'clock and two in the afternoon, but nobody seemed to know whether that was reckoning by Moscow time or Turkmenistan time; some said one thing and some another. It was impossible to get anything definite.

Krasnovodsk by daylight revealed itself as a desolate dust-heap of a town surrounded by fierce mountains of solid reddish rock. It is a seaport and nothing more, but as a seaport of the Turcoman S.S.R. has some importance, being the link between Central Asia and European Russia. To it come the products—chiefly raw cotton and dried fruits—from Turkmenistan and Western Uzbekistan, and it has a big import of timber, corn sugar, and oil from Baku.

(At this point it should perhaps be explained that Russian Turkestan consists of five republics—Turkmenistan, Kazakstan, Tadjikstan, Uzbekistan, and Kirghizia. The trans-Caspian railway passes through Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and turns north at Tashkent into Kazakstan; a branch line goes on to Ferghana, in the east of Uzbekistan, almost on the Kirghizia border, and crossing northern Tadjikstan to get there. Bokhara, Samarkand, and Tashkent, are all in Uzbekistan. Northern Afghanistan touches the southern boundaries of Uzbekistan, and China touches the boundaries of Tadjikstan and Kirghizia.)

As a town, Krasnovodsk scarcely exists. Outside the station there is a square planted with dusty tamarisks, but the place appears to be used more as a public latrine than as a public garden. In the streets behind there are a few small cafés and eating-houses, very dirty and full of flies, and a few equally squalid shops. All its life is centred round its docks. There are a number of low-built modern white houses which presumably

house the dock workers, for there is no industry here, except the remains of a fishing industry. A few small boats with tall red sails do a little fishing still, and trade along the Caspian coast.

Behind the modern white houses, farther on towards the edge of the desert, we found a colony of Kazaks, a branch of the Kirghiz tribes, living in their round igloo-like tents fashioned of a willow framework over which sheepskins and bits of carpet and felt are hung to keep out the weather. The roof is left open when a fire is burning inside the tent, and closing the roof is merely a matter of replacing the folded back coverings. Wandering about among these *yurts*, as they are called, we encountered a young Kazak who had obviously been ' socialised ', judging by his European clothes. Donia asked if we might see inside one of the tents, and he conducted us to one immediately. Pulling aside the sheepskin which served as a doorway he bade us enter. It was very hot inside, and teemed with flies. Light came from the bared framework of the roof. Strips of brightly coloured carpet and hand-woven rugs hung round the walls, over a layer of rush matting. On the floor there was a dark red carpet, and a number of brass kettles and jugs and wooden bowls. There was no furniture. In a scooped-out hollow in the middle of the floor a small fire of sticks and dried dung burned. A stolid thick-set woman with Mongolian features sat cross-legged on the carpet and regarded us stolidly. She wore the long loose robe and white swathed head-dress of the Kazak women. There were some little girls, flat-faced, oblique-eyed, who also wore long robes, and their black hair in long tight thin plaits. They studied us with a solemn interest. The woman showed no inclination to be friendly; her manner was one of a stolid indifference to our intrusion. The lad who had brought us there, however, was very friendly, and having shown us the old-style Kazak home was eager to show us the homes of the ' socialised ' Kazak. They were, he said, building these houses themselves. They were four-square, low, white-washed, and consisted of one room only. I could not, personally, see any improvement on the old-style dwelling, unless the existence of a window and chimney and a proper door be counted an improvement. But no doubt to get

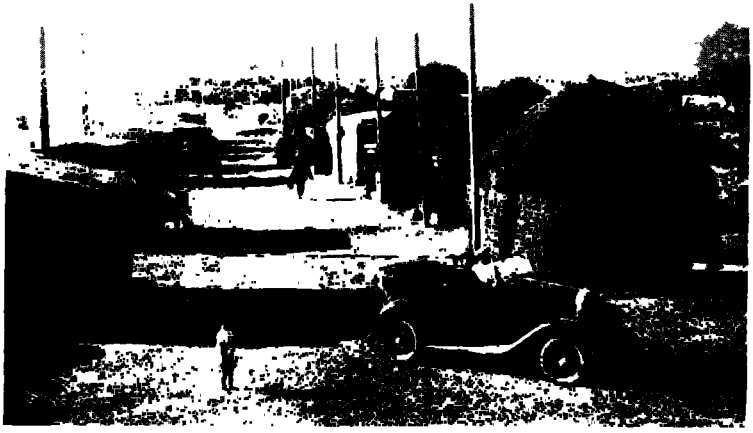
the Kazaks to live in brick-built houses is 'a step in the right direction', from the point of view of 'socialisation' and of converting them from their age-old nomadism to Western civilisation in terms of Stalinism. These are the people of whom Ralph Fox wrote in his *People of the Steppes* that their veins hold 'the mingled blood of all the Turko-Mongol peoples, conquerors of the world, shepherds, soldiers, justice-givers to mankind, *men who had made Asia in their day.* They were like the dreams that an old story brings to birth, like the imaginings that rise from some old inscription found in the waste to bear sole witness to a high glory dead.'

The italics are mine. Stalinism is impatient of the high glory, and is intent on Europeanising Asia. It is anti-social merely to sit in the sun and enjoy life, or to roam the great plains and deserts of Russia with horses and herds. Horses and herds are collectivised, and the Kazaks, whose name means 'riders',[1] from whence is derived the Russian word *Cossack*, ride the steppes no more in their old free fashion, but are encouraged to settle down and play their part in the Five Year Plans. Yet, 'how superior these Kazaks, with their native dignity, which bears certain testimony to a culture whose traces still persist, seem to all these Russians!' Ella Maillart reflects on a train in Turkestan, and adds, significantly, 'And to think I once thought them a primitive people!'

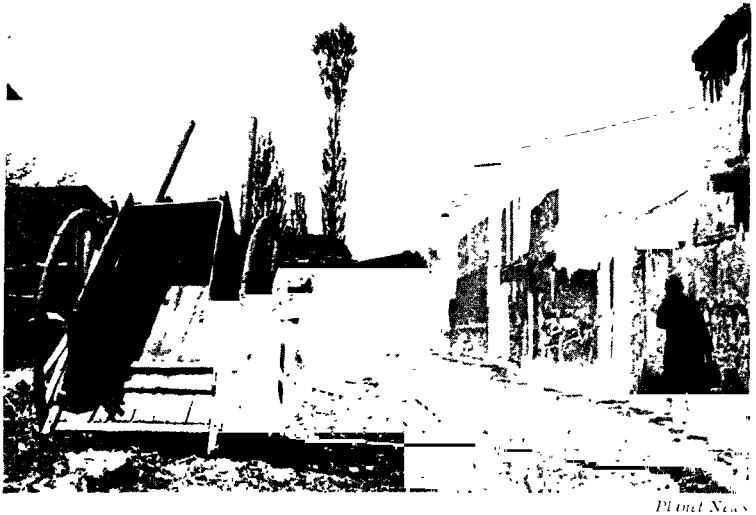
Not all the Kazaks are yet socialised, of course. Nomad tribes are still to be encountered in the steppes and the deserts with their caravans of camels and donkeys and herds. The anonymous Russian author of an entertaining but rather exasperatingly incomplete little book, *From Moscow to Samarkand*,[2] declares that the Kazak steppes have been left practically untouched by Europeanising influences. Inasmuch as the people still live in their *yurts* and are still addicted to wandering, this is true, but electric light and the radio have invaded the steppes and the desert, along with the red-draped portraits of Stalin. Margaret Craig McKerrow, writing of Alma-Ata, in Kirghizia,

[1] Ella Maillart, in *Turkestan Solo*, gives it as meaning vagabond. She also quotes the Kazaks as being called 'eaters-of-men', being accused of feeding on corpses.

[2] The Hogarth Press (1934).



Voks



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Above : THE SOCIALISATION OF THE EAST
Electric light in the *Yurts* of the Kazaks.

Below : STREET-SCENE IN OLD TASHKENT
But it is equally typical of old Samarkand. The houses are of sun-baked yellow mud. The high-wheeled cart—*arbas*—is used throughout Turkestan.

says that of the 40,000 workers, fifty per cent are Kazaks. And she reproduces a photograph of Kirghiz women standing beside a Mahometan tomb with a statue of Lenin. . . .

Leaving Krasnovodsk's Kazak settlement, we turn our backs on the great sea of grey dust of the desert—we are beginning to realise for the first time the significance of the phrase 'the dust of Asia'—and facing the sea again wander down wide unmade roads inches deep in dust and flanked by low, white-washed houses, and come to a piece of wide, dusty wasteland where a mangey camel stands staring out to sea, a painful-looking peg thrust through its nostrils. Here a market is in progress. It is not much of a market from the point of view of goods, but it is interesting to eyes not yet accustomed to the Eastern elements of Russian Turkestan. The women are highly decorative, with their head-dresses, Turkish-looking trousers, and huge round wrought-metal brooches on their cotton robes. The men wear round hats bound with astrachan or sheepskin, the ear-flaps buttoned back over the top. Their coats are padded, like cumbersome quilted dressing-gowns, or are contrived of sheepskin. The little girls have their black hair tightly braided into numerous little thin plaits. Most of the types seen in the streets of the old part of Baku are to be seen here, but the addition of the Kazaks increases the Asiatic atmosphere.

The goods displayed are meagre. They consist of handfuls of inferior-looking tomatoes, little heaps of sunflower seeds, beans, the usual bruised green apples, earthenware jugs and thick tumblers full of sour milk, plates of dried fish, and horribly unappetising-looking pieces of cooked meat. Flies swarm thickly over everything. Some of the goods are laid out on trestle tables, others in heaps at the feet of the vendors, who squat on the ground. A young man strolls up and down with a pair of canvas shoes for sale. I am carrying a pair of blue woollen gloves, for which I receive several offers. There is something forlorn and desolate about this market on the edge of the desert. There is no eager buying and selling, no crying of goods, no coaxings to buy. The people offering the goods for sale look as though they are quite indifferent as to whether they sell them or not, and the people who examine the goods do so as though they have no intention of buying if they can help it. An old man

squatting in the dust weighs a handful of beans in hand-scales, with broken stones for weights. Only the flies seem to enjoy themselves and take any real interest.

A party of convicts, of a variety of races, shuffles along through the dust, in charge of warders with rifles. The prison building is a decrepit-looking place with broken windows and rusted barbed-wire entanglements which have collapsed into uselessness.

Beyond the dusty tamarisks of the town square is a row of booths for the sale of newspapers, soft drinks, cigarettes, eatables. We find the ' sailor ' lounging here, picking his teeth, staring at nothing. We ask if he knows when the Samarkand train is due. He has no idea. There is nothing to do but wait around.

By now the pavement outside the station is massed with people sitting on their bundles, leaning against the fence, squatting in the gutter. The sunlight is dazzling on the white buildings, the arid dusty spaces, the bare rocks of the mountains. There is no shadow anywhere in Krasnovodsk. It is the beginning of the desert.

We retrieve our rucksacks and dump them against the fence and sit down. The flies are enough to drive one mad.

II

DESERTS AND COTTON-FIELDS

THE train comes in about midday, by the sun, whatever time it is by Moscow or Turkestan time. There is a wild stampede to break through the barriers on to the platform, and then a wild rush along the lines. We find places in a 'hard' coach, but this time we have more than the terrific heat, the smell, and the hardness to contend with; a new horror is the flies. They buzz over the panes of the hermetically sealed windows, swarm over the seats and tables, and hum maddeningly round one's face. The prospect of sitting bolt upright in this horrible cattle-truck of a compartment for several days and nights—for we have neither corner-seats nor 'places' in which to lie down—horrifies us. We have not slept for two nights, we ache in all our bones from lying on the deck and down below, and we have not had a proper meal since we left Baku, and feel altogether completely unequal to this fresh nightmare. The accommodation here is three tiers high—that is to say three layers of shelves, and all of them packed with humanity, its bundles, its bedding, its kettles, its stinking dried fish and garlic sausage. I try to think of Ella Maillart lying in the corridor of the fourth-class Maxim Gorki train from Aris to Tashkent, but it is no use. I cannot convince myself that it was more horrible than this. We have already done two nights 'hard', and if we don't sleep tonight . . .

We go through to the soft coach and implore the woman guard to find us a soft place; even one will do, we beseech. We will

make it worth her while. . . . 'My friend has been ill. She is not strong', Donia adds, by way of further encouragement. The woman studies a list, thoughtfully. She is a stolid-looking, thick-set woman wearing a man's coat, high boots, a thick woollen scarf wound round her head. She is pasty-faced and barrel-shaped. We discover later that she has several other coats under this top one. There will be a *coupé* by the evening, she informs us; she will keep it for us, but she will have to get 'soft' tickets for us at the station from which we take over. We give her the requisite amount of roubles and something over, with a promise of more to come when the *coupé* is ours. In that moment we would give her almost anything.

We spend all day sitting in the restaurant-car as an alternative to the cattle-truck we have left. It is hot in here, too, but there is no bad smell, and the flies are fewer. It is like a hut, with cottage windows with little curtains, and on the tables geraniums in pots. Looking out of the windows on either side there is nothing but desert. Hour after hour after hour. Sometimes it is just a flat waste of sand reaching away in all directions to the sky-line. Sometimes it is broken into dunes. We are approaching the desert of Kara-Kum, meaning Black Sands, and which has been called 'The Grave of Caravans'. In this desert is the ruined city of Merv, the oldest city in Asia, founded by Zoroaster, and destroyed by Genghis Khan and his Mongols. Some distance from the ruins of the ancient city there is a new city of Merv, dating from the nineteenth century, when it was rebuilt by the Russians. But we do not come to Merv until the second day; all the first day we are in a grey, uninteresting desolation in which the only signs of life are the tents of the Kazaks near the wayside halts, and occasional camels grazing on the desert scrub. At every halt wild-looking people, Turcomen and Kazaks, the men with immense shaggy sheepskin hats, grey, black, and brown, very matted and verminous looking, and wearing quilted coats, like dressing-gowns, some of them gaily flowered, and the women with flowing robes and turbaned head-dresses, come selling melons, tomatoes, sour milk, pears.

In the evening we become involved in a Russian birthday-party half a dozen Russians are giving in the restaurant car. They have a gramophone and they want to dance, and there

are no women available except the little fair-haired waitress, Varya, a child of about sixteen, who is too busy. We dance with them in the narrow space between the tables. It is no more—and no less—difficult than dancing on a damp deck, and they dance extremely well. They drink a great many beers, and then begin on vodka. They are very gay. One of them has a smattering of French. Another knows two words of English, 'Dam' good', which he exclaims loudly at the end of every dance. It becomes a little exhausting partnering the six of them, for they give us no rest, the gramophone is kept going continuously, and we are passed from partner to partner until finally we are too dizzy to dance any more. Of all the ways of making the 'golden' journey to Samarkand it had not occurred to us that we might dance across the desert. . . .

We sink exhausted into our berths that night, but we are not destined to sleep in peace. In the middle of the night the door of the *coupé* is flung back, noisily, and no less than five militia enter.

We are, of course, quite convinced that so far as ever reaching Samarkand is concerned, the game is up.

It appears that in attempting to get our 'soft' tickets the woman guard—not the one who had given us the *coupé*—has got left behind at the station. Telephoning through to the next station concerning her plight she had no recourse but to explain how it had occurred. Which meant explaining that there were two foreigners aboard the train, travelling 'soft' with 'hard' tickets. . . .

The militia are angry; they seem to think it is our fault that the guard is left behind. They seem, moreover, to think that we are up to no good. They regard us severely. Donia assures them that our intentions are utterly honourable, and that the matter of the tickets will be righted in the morning.

Finally they go away. Normally we might have lain awake all night worrying, but that night it would have taken the crack of doom to keep us from sleeping.

We waken in the morning to the same grey monotonous desert scenery that we had stared at all the previous day. We have, moreover, a sense of impending disaster, which materialises before we have left the compartment in search of breakfast. The

door opens again with that determined official brusqueness, and a male guard enters and forthwith demands to see our papers.

We know then, for a certainty, that the game is up. Behind him stands the woman-guard. We had told her we were Belgian and she had no doubt told the man, yet here he is handling our British passports, and she looking over his shoulder. . . .

He stares for some minutes, first at one passport, then at the other. Nonchalantly Donia continues the interrupted powdering of her face, and I my hair-dressing. Donia even ventures a valiant little hum, to show how confident we are that all was well. . . .

Finally he informs us that whereas the visa of one of us is expired by a few days, the visa of the other is expired by over a year.

Swinging round on him in amazement we then observe that he is gazing at Donia's passport, and not merely is he holding it upside down, but he is staring at an old visa.

She snatches it from him, impatiently, righting it, and giving it an angry little shake, and speaking harsh words to him.

He regards her indignantly. She has, he says, no right to speak to him like that. What, he would like to know, is she getting excited about?

She explains to him heatedly that at least he might concentrate on the right visa, the right way up. . . .

He gives her a cold look and resumes attention to the visa, and after some moments announced that our visas were expired on the 4th, and that he must wire the consul from the next station to see what is to be done about us. With which pronouncement he stalks out.

We sit down on the lower berth and look at each other, morosely.

"That settles it. We shall never get to Samarkand now. We shall be put off at the next station."

Gloomily we contemplate the picture of being dumped at some desolate station in the desert.

"What do you suppose they'll do with us, when they've dumped us?"

"Send us back to Krasnovodsk, I suppose."

"If I have to do that Caspian journey again I shall quite

simply die. It would be easier. But they might send us on to Tashkent and make us go straight back to Moscow from there."

"Well, anyhow we want to go back to Moscow. Actually we're on the way back now——"

"But to have done all this and not see Samarkand—except from the train window——"

"Most people never do even that——"

"I can't bear it. Don't you think we might try and get round the consul? You know—sex-appeal—charm, and all that——"

"You don't really imagine that either of us have either sex-appeal or charm at the moment, do you?"

"We might have a go at our faces——"

We set to work with cold cream, and all the paraphernalia of make-up we have not used for weeks—in that other life-time, before we went to the Caucasus . . . it seems a fantastically long time ago since we parted with the Germans on the hill-top vineyards in morning sunlight. . . .

Suddenly, wildly waving her lipstick, Donia springs up.

"My God!" Her cheeks are flushed with excitement.

"What now?" I look up from the tricky process of eyelash-darkening in a rocking train.

"The man's mad! We're saved! Our visas are finished on the 4th—and to-day's only the 3rd!"

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. I remember marking in my diary that we arrived in Krasnovodsk on the second—well, the first day on the train was that day, wasn't it, the second, and today's our second day on the train, that makes it the third, tomorrow, our third and last day on the train we arrive in Samarkand—and so far as he is concerned can renew our visas from there the following day, the first day of their expiry!"

She rushes out into the corridor—and does not reappear for half an hour.

Getting impatient I go out into the corridor myself to look for her, and to my amazement see her leaning against a window laughing and chatting with the guard, as though they are the best of friends—as, indeed, they are by that time.

"What did he say when you told him?" I ask later.

"He said he realised his mistake as soon as he'd left us!"

"My God! You'd think he'd have come back and apologised, and set our minds at rest, wouldn't you? But for you making the discovery about the date we might have sat all day in dread, prepared to meet our consul. . . ."

"I know. But all that matters now is that we're the best of friends, and I've promised him faithfully we'll renew our visas in Samarkand. I wonder where the 'sailor' is, by the way—seems odd that he hasn't been along this morning."

"He was very drunk last night. He's probably got a hang-over and is sleeping it off this morning."

"Well, I think I'll go and see."

"He'll only come sponging on us for meals again—and he's never yet given us the change from those places he's supposed to have paid for for us on the boat. I'm fed up with him."

"I know. His charm does begin to wear a bit thin, but if he's going to fix us up with a room at his brother's in Samarkand we'd better keep in with him. It'll make it a lot easier for us to have a place to go to——"

This idea that he should take us to his brother's had been proposed on the boat. Discovering that he knew Samarkand we had asked him if he could suggest where we could get a room other than at the hotel, which, we said, would be too expensive for us. We did not want to tell him that we dared not go to the hotel.

He had replied by suggesting that he should take us to his brother's, who, it seemed, had a good-sized house in Samarkand. He had been going only as far as Ashkabad, but if the idea appealed to us he would come on to Samarkand, first wiring his brother from Krasnovodsk. He would have to borrow the difference in the fare from Ashkabad to Samarkand from us, but he would repay it when we arrived at his brother's. We said that if he would oblige us in this way we should insist on paying the difference, not making it a loan. He had protested at that, saying he would prefer to repay us on arrival.

I had never been in favour of the idea. We had a letter of introduction to a professor at Samarkand University, and I preferred to rely on that.

"But supposing the professor's not there?"

Well, yes, there was that; the bird in the hand was undoubtedly this brother idea. . . . And after all it need be only for one night; if the professor was at the university we could move away from the 'sailor's' household possibly the very next day.

The first day on the train the 'sailor' had come into the restaurant car when we were there and seated himself at our table. He had ordered a meal, and when he had finished it had asked that we should settle the bill when it came—he wanted to go back to the compartment to see if the baggage—which included our own—was all right. He would settle up with us later.

I had been very angry.

"Tell him," I had commanded, "that we are dam' well not going to keep him, and that his bill is nothing to do with us!"

"We can't very well have a row with him if he's coming with us to Samarkand."

But I had insisted, "Put it all on to me! My God, I wish I spoke the language!"

"It's probably just as well you can't!"

But she had told him, firmly, that her friend did not like it that we should be required to pay his bill, also that her friend wished to remind him that he had not yet given us the change he was due to give us on the boat. . . .

He had been hurt; even a little angry. Could we not trust his good proletarian word?

Tell him, said I, not to be a bourgeois humbug. . . .

We had paid the bill in the end, of course, and seen no more of him till the evening, in the dining-car, where we found him drinking beer, and a bit drunk and sullen. The Russians had not invited him to join the party, and he had continued to sit along, drinking continuously, and becoming more morose and glowering with every glass. A young man at an opposite table drank himself into a stupor that evening, and our own party were well away. But hour after hour of desert, and a train which chugs along with a positively local line jog-trot complacency, is enough to drive anyone to drink.

The last we had seen of the 'sailor' was lurching away out of the dining-car the night before.

And that is the last we ever do see of him. For Donia returns from her search for him with the news that passengers in his coach say that he dropped off at Ashkabad in the night. . . .

"He probably hasn't got a brother or anyone else at Samarkand!"

"Today's great thought!"

"What shall we do if the professor isn't there?"

"One thing at a time. God sometimes looks after his little ones. Look at the visa business. . . ."

I, personally, am frankly glad to have seen the last of the 'sailor'. I have met before that thoroughly dishonest person who can look you smilingly in the eyes. Ability to look someone straight in the eyes proves nothing. The good liar always can. He—or she—would not be a good liar otherwise. There is such a thing as being too frank to be honest.

I am angry not so much with the 'sailor' as with myself, for allowing my better judgment, that is to say my case-hardened scepticism where human nature is concerned, to be overruled, and particularly by anything as relatively unimportant as to where we are going to sleep when we get to Samarkand. The only important thing is getting there. We shall not, after all, die of exposure if we have to sleep in a doorway for a night or so; other human creatures, considerably less well equipped for it than ourselves, do it and survive.

Not that it is a prospect to look forward to, for the nights are quite savagely cold, and frost lies like scattered salt over the desert at sundown. The costumes of the Turcomen become increasingly interesting as we go East. Now there are men with skull caps, and with shawls and scarves tied round their waists, the point at the back, like an apron worn the wrong way round. There are trousered women with handkerchiefs covering their heads, and the quilted coats of the men grow gayer; floral designs in bright pinks and red are mostly favoured. Now in addition to the *yurts* of the Kazaks there are square, flat-roofed mud huts, with beams and guttering projecting all round, from the tops of the walls, like guns. The desolation and monotony of the desert begins to give place now to what at first glance appear, to the uninitiated, to be vineyards. Closer inspection reveals tufts of white fluff attached to the low vines. We have

Planet News

Wide World

Above : UZBEK MERCHANTS

Note the quilted coats, and that the man on the right is wearing a skull-cap.

Below : COTTON-GATHERERS IN TURKMENISTAN

The man is wearing a typical sheepskin hat. The ends of the woman's head-dress serve the purpose of veiling the lower-half of the face when occasion demands. (See illustration facing page 332.)

come to the cotton-fields. Just as part of the journey was all steppe, then all desert, now it is all cotton.

Cotton has been grown in Turkestan since its earliest history, but now everything is sacrificed to cotton, and the rice and grain which it has replaced have to be imported from other parts of the country by means of the Turk–Sib railway, which in view of the vast distances to be covered is no small part of the problem of feeding the populace.

When the cotton-fields were first collectivised and expanded, American Negroes were imported to teach the people how most efficiently to sow and to pick cotton, and it is now claimed that the cotton industry of Central Asia, with its modern machinery and collectivised labour, represents a serious menace to the American and Egyptian markets.

The snowy whiteness of the raw cotton, piled up in great mounds as big as large English haystacks, is an astonishing sight to see for the first time. There are sacks and sacks, bales and bales, stacks and stacks, of cotton, for miles. Through some of the 'haystacks' tunnels have been bored, so that it is hard to believe that it is cotton and not a great mound of snow. On railway sidings by the cotton-fields are endless lines of trucks all piled with sacks and bales and mounds of cotton. The fact that most of the stacks are covered with tarpaulin makes them more than ever like white haystacks.

The dwellings of the cotton workers are mud huts built for the most part round open squares, like the huts of collective farm workers we saw by the aerodrome flying from Tiflis to Baku. I noted in my diary, at the time, a Communist reply to my protest against the living conditions of the cotton-workers:

"These conditions are the result of generations and generations of exploitation by the merchants of the Tsarist regime. The Soviets are working now for the emancipation—that is to say, the socialisation of these backward peoples. The situation is comparable to that of the Indian peasant under the British Imperialist regime. It is uphill work socialising these people, but there are great hopes of the rising generation, who are being educated."

Ella Maillart, on the other hand, writes in her book (1934) of the inhabitants of Turkestan bitterly complaining that, while

the process of adaptation was going on, living conditions had become practically impossible, and that the natives were returning to their nomadic conditions of life, seeking better conditions, and abandoning the *kolkhozes*, where the promised abundance was not always to be found.

Travelling without a permit, and therefore without facilities for investigating the matter for myself, I am not in a position to be able to offer my own views on this matter. I can only say that impartiality emerges as a marked feature of Ella Maillart's book—it is essentially a *travel* book, giving strongly throughout the impression of being neither pro nor anti the Soviet regime, and I, personally, both from her book and from meeting her, would be prepared to accept her word every time against the propaganda-ridden and necessarily biased views of any local commissar or any Communist. In my own observation the dwellings of the cotton-workers could hardly have been more squalid under the Tsars—though I am well aware that the Communist answer to this is that Russia is still in a state of 'transition'—to which there is no answer. We are back once more to the jam-tomorrow argument. Throughout the Soviet Republics it would seem that there is no answer to anything but the Asquithian slogan—*Wait and see.*

The food on the train begins to give out on the second day; by the third day there is very little left, and that greasily indigestible. At one station we join a melon queue, thinking that the cool cleanness of the fruit will help to counteract the greasiness of the mess we have eaten. At another station Donia makes a sketch of a fine, handsome, impudent-looking old man in a brightly flowered quilted coat and a round fur hat. His coat is open to his waist, revealing his naked and much lice-bitten torso; he busily chases lice in his navel whilst he stands in the queue of people who await admission to the platform. He grins with a fine show of good teeth when he realises that he is being sketched, and very much wants to be given the drawing, but he does not abandon his louse-hunt.

On every station there are the same tatterdemalion crowds with dressing-gown-like coats, some of them so patched or in such shreds that it is difficult to determine their original colouring, and verminous-looking sheepskin or fur hats. Many of the

men wear turbans. There are flat Mongol faces, with long, drooping moustaches, and handsome Persian faces with fine aquiline features. They are on the whole a wild, dirty, cheerful, poverty-stricken looking lot, these Turkestan crowds, readily friendly, quick to smile. We begin to meet with the *chedras*, that hideous 'veil' of black horse-hair worn by the unemancipated of the women of Asia. These veiled women move away before any attempt to photograph them. In their flowing robes and with this black mat before their faces they look like nothing so much as bundles of old clothes waddling about. It is hard to believe that they can see through this fantastic 'veil'.

These station crowds remind me of the railway stations in remote villages in the West of Ireland, where the villagers troop down to the station to see the train come in, on the off-chance of meeting new faces, and for something to do, and because the train is an event in the day—almost the only event of any social consequence. Here, too, are crowds of people who are obviously not travellers, but who have merely come to wave to the train and enjoy the spectacle of strange faces crowded at its windows. At some of the halts there are people sitting along the lines, waiting and watching. At every station and halt, peasant women and children run alongside the train, holding up jugs of sour milk, plates of hard-looking little scones, yellow-fleshed roast chickens.

And at every halt, however primitive, there is a red flag flying, and usually a picture of Lenin or Stalin, or both, displayed. There are pictures of Stalin on the sunbaked walls of mud huts in the deserts, and on the white-washed walls of lonely farm-houses in the steppes.

At one station a little girl stands beside the train holding a spray of bursting cotton-pods and leaves, and a little boy by her side strums a balalaika. There is something extraordinarily 'tender' about that little pair in this wild-looking crowd. As though one had found primroses growing under a stone in the desert.

Whenever there is time, we get out and walk along beside the train, for the sake of fresh air and exercise. Sometimes we climb back into a hard compartment, where the heat and smell are past belief, but we are nevertheless once severely reprimanded for leaving a door open as we pass through.

Dirty feet stick out from the ends of wooden shelves; careful dodging of them is necessary as one passes along the gangway. People playing cards, eating, sleeping. The floor is filthy with melon seeds and the husks of sunflower seeds, with crumbs, and greasy scraps of newspaper.

The engine-driver appears to take a malicious delight in starting the train when people are running along the lines to get to the nearest steps by which they may clamber up. At some of the halts the stop is very brief, and once the train starts off whilst some women clutching babies are still running along the sleepers trying to get aboard. The steps to the coaches are so high up from the track that it is hard work to board the train even when it is stationary; to have to do so whilst it is moving, and clutching a baby to one at the same time, is seemingly impossible. The poor creatures run like mad over the flints and sleepers, with their babies, their bundles, their big tea-kettles, and somehow, by what seems a miracle of agility, they succeed in boarding the moving train.

As we approach Bokhara we grow restless. The previous evening we had talked with two Russians to whom we had confided our yearning to see Bokhara, adding that we feared that accommodation might be difficult there. One of them had said that he could solve that problem for us by giving us a letter of introduction to a friend of his in the museum, where students were sometimes accommodated. I believe now that we should have taken a chance and accepted this offer, regardless of the fact that our papers were not in order. We had decided against it out of the dread that if our papers were asked for and we were expelled, we should never get to Samarkand . . . which was a dream I for one was not prepared to jeopardise. We had sounded the Russians on the subject of 'documents'; we had not thought it wise to confess that we had no official right to be in Turkestan at all, but told him that our visas were expired. We had hoped he would declare that it did not matter, that at the museum it would not be necessary to show any documents. But he had taken a serious view of the irregularity of our papers, and said at once that without visas his friend would not find it 'convenient' to accommodate us . . . so the dream of Bokhara which had drawn so excitingly near for

a few moments had receded again. Only to be revived the following morning by some conversation with a Red Army officer with an English name. His father was English and his mother German, and he was born in Leningrad. He converses with us in a slow, laborious German, since he does not speak English, and I can at least follow German sufficiently. He tells us that Bokhara is only one hundred and fifty miles from Samarkand, and suggests, why should we not go there by car? For a moment, remembering how we had made Gnädenburg from Nalchik, we fasten eagerly on the idea as an inspiration . . . then realise that we had spent the night at Gnädenburg, and where should we spend it in Bokhara? Moreover, old Bokhara is some distance from the new city and the railway station, and the roads out of the new town are bad. . . . The more we investigate the idea the more difficulties it presents, and the vision of ever standing beneath the storks' nest-crowned Mosque of Chor-Minar fades once again.

Bokhara was almost bracketed in my mind with Samarkand. But not quite. I could contemplate returning to Moscow, to England, having seen Samarkand and not Bokhara, but something died in me before the idea of returning home having seen Bokhara but having failed to make Samarkand. . . . So Bokhara was for us only a pale gleam of towers in the distance, across the cotton-fields. But somehow that is how I had pictured Bokhara—'divine Bokhara', Bokhara the Fallen, pale towers, remote and unreal as something in a dream . . . a dream that I should never realise. Yet, I tell myself, it is something to have seen Bokhara from afar.

After Bokhara there are pink mountains in the distance, hazy with afternoon, and tilled ground, ploughed by oxen, and numerous sun-baked mud huts. The country is neither steppe nor desert, but for the most part a desolation of dust with sparse scrub, and slow processions of camels in the dust, and a white-robed figure riding ahead on a donkey, and occasional horsemen galloping in flying clouds of dust.

Varya has become deeply attached to us. She is excessively demonstrative, and overwhelms us with smothering kisses and embraces. I make the mistake of showing her a snapshot of my daughter. She cannot at first believe that I have a daughter

nearly as old as she is, but when Donia assures her that it is true, she flings her arms round me and kisses me violently, calling me Little Mother, and informing us tearfully that she wants love very much, because she herself has no mother, and no one to love her, and the waiter on the train bullies her, and her life is very hard. . . .

After this she never leaves us alone. She cannot place a piece of bread on the table without making it an excuse to press the hand or put an arm round the shoulders of whichever of us is within reach, and we cannot keep her out of our *coupé*. All day long she bobs in and out, careful to close the door, then bouncing down on the bed on which we sit, flinging her arms round us both, and pulling us all three into a struggling heap with the violence of her embraces.

In one of these amorous scrimmages we observe that the knees of her stockings are in large holes, and that her stockings are tied up with string. When she sees that we have observed this untidiness she says that she cannot afford a new pair of stockings; the waiter makes her give up her tips, and if he sees her with any money that has been given to her, accuses her of stealing it. . . . We are so touched by this hard-luck story that in spite of our experience with the 'sailor' we provide her then and there with a pair of stockings. When we next see her she is wearing them, but during the inevitable romp informs us that she has no knickers. . . .

We are so shocked by this piece of information that we feel that we must provide her with this necessary garment immediately—then realise that it is impractical, travelling as light as we are, and with so few chances to wash anything out. We resolve to make her a present of a new set of underwear when we arrive in Tashkent.

But by the time we are ready to leave the train our hearts have hardened. We might provide her with underwear, only to be informed that she has no jumper but the ragged one she is wearing. There might well be no end to her needs once we start to cater for them. Besides, apart from the fact that we are heartily sick of her exuberant affection, we are inclined to a certain moral indignation; the child is clearly a slut; she could at least mend her stockings, and whatever she has to

dispense with it should not be that one essential garment which modesty demands. . . .

Thus does early training make Puritans of us all. Or perhaps we had merely had enough of her. She was pretty enough, in a childish, sulky way, but there was about her that by now all too familiar sickly sour-sweet smell, which added to the embarrassment of her affection for us. Truly there are in the end only two real social distinctions—the washed and the unwashed. We arranged, nevertheless, to go and stay in the house in Tashkent in which she had a room. She thought she could find us a room there, and they who travel without permits cannot be fastidious.

Poor little Varya ! Poor little waif ! She was by nature one of those people who always make one, afterwards, wish one had been kinder.

The woman-guard bore us no ill-will, apparently, for having lied to her concerning our nationality. We had an idea that actually she didn't know the difference between Belgian and British. Instead of disapproving of us after the denouement with the male guard, her interest in us appeared to increase. Between her duties she would come and sit with us and tell us about her life. It seemed that in spite of her pasty-faced, four-square unattractiveness, she had been married. But her husband had deserted her for another woman after six years, and now she was Through with Men. Or was it, I wondered cynically, that she had failed to land another? Whatever it was, she was bitter. Men, she declared, could never be trusted. They always betrayed one in the end. A woman was better on her own. Now she was answerable to no man; she could come and go as she pleased. . . .

Feminists always bore me. No man, thought I, is answerable to you, or ever will be so long as you go about looking like a blanket-wrapped barrel. Fox and the sour grapes, thought I, and how far yet to Samarkand. . . . The next stop but one. Then the next stop. It seems queer to be thinking of Samarkand in such familiar terms—'Next stop Samarkand'. . . .

Nothing can stop us now. Yet I shiver with apprehension. We shall not be truly in Samarkand till we stand upon the Registan.

III

MOONLIGHT IN SAMARKAND

OUTSIDE the station a square, a little garden in the middle, and in the middle of the garden a statue. Beyond, a broad avenue, a string of droshkies, a queue waiting beside a shelter. The sky blazes with stars. It is bitterly cold. The stars are like chips of ice.

We make inquiries. The town is some distance from the station, some miles. There is a 'bus. We stand in the queue for a little while that seems a long while. Our feet freeze. We stamp and shuffle, but it is no good. Our feet are like blocks of ice. Samarkand is an oasis; we are surrounded by desert. Why do none of the people who write romantically about desert nights mention the bitter cold that descends on the desert after sundown? We ask the patient, motionless, shawled figure in front how often the 'buses run, if she has any idea when there will be a 'bus. She regards us stolidly. Who knows, she says, and turns away. There is nothing more to be said. And for us, nothing for it but a droshky, cost what it may. But a 'bus would have been preferable even had a droshky been cheaper. A 'bus provides shelter, warmth. But to be able to wait patiently for an indefinite time in freezing cold requires a certain Asiatic quality of temperament.

The driver of the droshky is muffled up to the eyes in a vast leather coat with an astrachan collar, and a great astrachan hat is pulled down to his eyebrows. The ear-flaps of the hat fasten under his chin, and any portion of his face other than

his eyes which might possibly have been visible is smothered in a large and disorderly beard. He leans down from his high seat above his scrawny horse and we inquire whether the University is open at this time of the night. He tells us No, at such an hour it is closed, everyone gone away. We then inquire the fare to the post-office, from whence we propose to try to telephone to the professor. We have no telephone number, but tell ourselves that doubtless his name will be found in the directory, and we can reach him at his home.

We have a pleasant picture of being received by the professor and his wife—he is sure to have a wife—in a charming, softly lighted, book-filled room. We are offered refreshment—good hot tea, very nicely served, and perhaps a dish of eggs, all very clean, and ungreasy and palatable. Then as the night wears on in pleasant chat the professor's wife asks us where we are staying; we confess that we have no place, and she promptly insists that we stay there, and shows us to a charming room, simple, but very clean. And there is a soft mattress and clean sheets, and of course a bathroom next door. We bath, we wash out our clothes, we sink into clean sheets, the weariness of two nights on a train and two nights on a ship's deck falls away from us. We can even laugh it off, lightly. "Oh, of course, it wasn't very comfortable, but still—" brightly, carelessly, "it's all over now." The professor's wife cossets us, as the *Gnädige Frau* did, with hot-water bottles, mulled wine. . . .

It is quite intolerably cold in the droshky, and the horse ambles along at a jog-trot pace, *klop*-klop, *klop*-klop, *klop*-klop. Tall, untidy trees which in the starlight might be eucalyptus or straggly poplars move past on either side; there is no sensation of movement in the droshky. There are jagged edges of ice in the wind that rides with us. Occasionally there are huddles of squat adobe houses, and alleyways between white-washed walls; sometimes there is a cobbled path, sometimes only a broken walk a few feet above a stream. There is no sign of life. The little Eastern houses keep their secrets. Only jackals would prowl those sinister passages after dark. To walk there in the moonlight would be like treading the endless distorted perspectives of a nightmare.

Klop-klop, *klop*-klop, *klop*-klop.

Samarkand. Samarkand. Samarkand.

Forever after, now, I tell myself, however circumscribed my ways, the stars will bear witness that once I was in Samarkand. The realisation of a dream is like a lover's moment of pure joy; whatever happens afterwards, nothing can take it away. It is the perfume of the mystic rose, inviolate.

A muffled voice at my side cuts through the lyric ecstasy with a somewhat truculent: "Well, we've got here, anyway! Aren't you pleased?"

"This hardly counts. Besides, I'm frozen." Tell what is tellable, and the stars keep the rest.

"Me, too. If we can't find the professor——"

"We'll get in somewhere. Don't worry."

It is easy to be patient now; all that nervous impatience has gone. The forbidden place has been achieved. Consummation of the high dream is not yet, but with certainty, urgency decreases.

The avenue is interminable, on and on and on. *Klop*-klop, *klop*-klop, *klop*-klop. The flat-roofed white houses grow fewer; instead of sinister narrow alleyways, wide tree-lined avenues begin to open out on either side, but there is still the sound of running water, and the gleam of it in the gutters. There are streams everywhere, at the sides of the roads, and cutting across the rough unmade paths.

Now there are big, modern-looking buildings, and with a jingle of bells, the droshky stops. The horse snorts, as though to say About time too, and a cloud of steam rises from its nostrils. The driver jerks his whip towards a large building and mutters unintelligibly.

We step out of the rickety narrowness of the droshky. We are stiff with cramp as well as cold, and nearly step into a two-foot-wide ditch full of running water. We pay the droshky driver, cross a plank bridge, climb a flight of stone steps to an imposing building—the General Post Office. It is a relief to find it open so late at night, and a still greater relief to enter its stuffy warmth. There is a young woman in a white blouse behind a wire netting. She is chatting to another young woman in an astrachan collared coat, who leans on the counter. They glance at us without interest as we enter. Donia struggles with

a tattered directory and finally gives it up and politely inquires of the young woman behind the netting as to how one finds a telephone number in Samarkand; the directory does not appear to give telephone numbers. . . .

The young woman behind the netting says there is no telephone book, and resumes her conversation with her friend. Donia interposes politely but firmly to ask where we might perhaps find a telephone book. Over at the Telephone Station, snaps White Blouse. We are foreigners, and strangers to Samarkand, says Donia, and if she would be good enough to direct us to the Telephone Station. . . . White Blouse is now in a great rage. She tells us where to go, but she is very rude. And why the hell should she be rude, we ask ourselves resentfully as we go out into the cold, and how would she herself like to be in a foreign and strange city at this time of the night trying to track down a bed for the night. . . .

We find the Telephone Station at last. The tree-lined streets are very ill-lit, and there are ditches full of water everywhere, at the sides of the roads, and sometimes cutting across the uneven unmade paths. A man with a bicycle whom we consult tells us to go up to the first floor. Was he playing a rather unpleasant joke on us? At the top of a dark flight of stairs we saw the gleam of light under a door. We push open the door, and then start back, for we find ourselves on the threshold of a big room empty of furniture, and lighted by naked electric-light bulbs; on the bare floor, all round this bare room men lie covered with dark blankets. Several raise their heads to look at us as we enter. Others stare from over blanket edges or from the curve of naked arms. . . . Who are they? How can they sleep in that white glare of light, whoever they may be? We retreat, hurriedly, and descend the stairs to the ground floor and the street. What shall we do? Somewhere in Samarkand there must be a telephone book. . . .

"We passed the hotel on the way—do you remember? How about going there and asking for the book?"

"Dare we?"

"We needn't be English. They needn't hear us speak English. Anyhow, they can't make us show our papers just for a look at their telephone book!"

"All right, let's try it."

We tramp back to the modern pink-washed building which is the hotel. In the darkness and cold it seems much longer a distance than we later discover it to be in reality. Our feet and hands are frozen again by the time we arrive.

The hotel is very smart and modern-looking outside, all bare curves and angles, but inside there are the usual dingy plants, flies, fustiness. A bad-tempered-looking young woman is sitting at a desk in the entrance lounge; two men wearing astrachan hats and heavy overcoats are talking to her. We stand a little distance away, politely, waiting for them to pause and give us a chance to obtrude ourselves. They do pause at last, but the young woman continues to look through us. Donia asks if we might have the use of the hotel's telephone book for a few moments. The young woman says the hotel is shut up; it is being redecorated; the telephone book is locked up in an office; it is unobtainable. She turns to the two men and addresses them, dismissing us. Donia persists; it means very much to us to see the telephone book; if the *tovarich* would be so very kind as to send someone with the key to unlock the office. The woman snaps that it is impossible. One of the men addresses Donia. Whom do we wish to find? Donia tells him the name of the professor. He repeats it several times but he does not know it. But do we know that this professor is on the telephone? Not many people in Samarkand yet have telephones.

But a professor—a professor would surely be on the telephone——

Well, it does not follow. But if we wish to make sure, he recommends that we should ask at the pharmacy. There is a telephone book there for sure.

So back up the freezing avenue we trundle, and at some cross-roads see a brightly lighted street. Here are shops, and a few fly-blown cafés. Although it is late at night a big food stores is open; there is a crowd gathered outside, and there are mounted militia.

We find the pharmacy; it is open, and we enter. A cross-looking woman tells us there is no telephone book. She suggests we go to the cinema; there may be one there. The cinema,

mercifully, is only a few doors down the street. We find an office and a couple of men wearing leather coats and peaked caps. They are very civil. But there is no telephone book. They unlock an office for us and telephone through to 'Inquiries', to find out, if possible, if this professor has a telephone number. But Inquiries have gone off duty for the night. . . .

The only telephone book in Samarkand, apparently, is in the hotel, and it is locked up and inaccessible.

By this time we feel that we cannot tramp about any longer; we are frozen and we are hungry. We cross the road and enter a dingy café. Only to discover that it sells only glasses of tea, cups of coffee, dry bread—they have no butter—and a sort of stale, sweet roll. Such goods as they have are displayed behind a glass-fronted counter. There are bare shelves behind. There are a great many flies. It is all indescribably dreary. The process of securing the articles displayed is the same as in any Russian shop; you must first get to the counter and make your choice and secure a ticket for what you want; then take your ticket to the cash-desk and pay; then return with your stamped ticket to the counter to secure your goods. There is a queue for the cash-desk. It seems an age before we are finally seated at a grubby table—with the inevitable plant—sipping glasses of hot weak tea and chewing at stale dry rolls.

We decide that it is useless to try to find the professor tonight. No doubt it would be easy enough to do if we went to the militia but that is the one thing we dare not do. We consult a waitress who consults another waitress, who consults a male customer. Nobody knows of anyone who has a room. We feel we are beginning to attract attention in the café, and as we feel that we are not in the position to feel safe in attracting attention to ourselves, we leave.

We tramp away down the street, and at the cross-roads find a string of droshkies.

"A droshky driver would be the most likely person to know of a place——"

"He'll take one look at us and want to take us to the hotel——"

"We'll say we can't afford that——"

We consult a ferocious-looking creature all whiskers and fur.

He can think of nothing except the hotel and a *chai-khana* (tea-house).

"Let him take us to a *chai-khana.*"

"Heaven knows what sort of Oriental den——"

"We can't afford to be fussy."

So once more we go klop-kloping along tree-lined avenues with *ariks* at either side, but now instead of coming to modern buildings, we come to a street of rickety-looking little wooden houses, a few feet across the pavement from which are low platforms, some of them with bamboo railings and a flimsy roof over. It is our first glimpse of *chai-khanas.*

Suddenly at the end of this street we see tall slender towers, like factory chimneys, but of palely gleaming tiles, and between them the great sweep of an arch. . . .

For the life of me I cannot keep the betraying tremor out of my voice as I try to say casually: "It looks as though we are coming to the Registan."

At the end of the street the droshky halts, outside an open *chai-khana.*

Now we are aware of everything at once, and it is too much. There is a splendour of pale blue towers and arches reaching up to the blazing stars, there is an open square with an ugly wooden kiosk in the middle, there is this three-sided tea-house, and a blur of yellow faces with oblique eyes, of robed figures sitting cross-legged on a carpet-covered raised floor, and a lantern swinging from the roof, giving a pale yellow light, and it is all like all the pictures one has ever seen or imagined of Chinese opium dens as they are not. . . .

We know that even if they are prepared to have us that we could not stay in this place. But they cannot have us, and they recommend us to the agricultural workers' *obshijiti* a little farther on beyond the Registan.

"It'll be a sort of doss-house—dormitories. Like the Metro workers' place we saw in Moscow last year——"

"Better than a *chai-khana.*"

We leave the gleaming towers behind and rattle on into a dark, narrow street and in a few minutes stop outside a dark doorway. The driver jerks his whip. We descend and cross the uneven pavement and pull a wire bell-rope. We wait some

time before the patched wooden gateway is opened. Then we see a slatternly-looking young woman with untidy hair and a sullen, stupid face.

She hesitates a moment before she says, Yes, there is room, and admits us to a cobbled courtyard. We pay the droshky-driver and send him away.

The moon is up now and it is almost as light as day in the courtyard. There are lights in the buildings which flank it, and we see through curtainless windows rows of iron bedsteads covered with grey blankets. Naked electric bulbs swing from the ceilings. People lie with the blankets pulled across their faces, shielding their eyes against the glare. Some lie with their arms under their heads, wide awake, staring . . . waiting for the day. All the windows are closed, and flies buzz on the dirty panes.

The young woman goes into a building and a few moments later returns lugging the frames of two camp-beds; under each arm she carries bundles of bedding. We offer to help her, but she makes a gesture of impatience, and begins to mount a rickety flight of wooden stairs leading up to a balcony. We follow her; some of the stairs are broken; one is missing altogether. On the balcony there is a door; we follow her into a room precisely similar to the rooms we had glimpsed on the ground floors. Two rows of beds, grey blankets, the glaring light, the dirty walls, the flies buzzing, but here it is all women who lie and stare, or shield their eyes against the light. The room is very hot; there is no air; there is the familiar smell.

The young woman dumps the bedsteads with a rattle and begins to make them up—that is to say, she throws on to them the thin, broken mattresses and dirty blankets. The mattresses are the most verminous-looking things that ever looked as though they had come off a rubbish-heap.

"Now we *shall* get lousy!"

"We needn't undress and we can protect our hair."

We sit down gingerly on the edge of the beds and begin to unlace our shoes. In a moment the young woman, who had gone out after throwing down the mattresses and blankets, returns with another armful of rags which she tosses on to the beds.

"Your papers, please."

"Oh, my God, even here!"

"We must say we've left them at the station with some baggage—plead that we are only staying the one night——"

The young woman is adamant. She cannot, she declares, let us stay one hour without papers! The militia frequently came round to inspect such places and examine the papers of those who slept there; if she could not show our papers she would get into very serious trouble. . . .

"But it is so far back to the station. You know yourself—it is miles. And we are so tired. Please do not make us go all that way to get our papers——"

"I am sorry. But only a fool would think of leaving his papers at the railway station! But since you have done so, why do you not go to the militia and explain your position? Then perhaps they will let you stay tonight and bring your papers in the morning?"

We bend down and begin to relace our shoes.

A woman lying in one of the narrow beds with a child of about five or six held close to her, raises herself to suggest: "Why do you not do as she says, *Tovarich?* If you explain that you are foreigners—that you do not know the regulations regarding foreigners——"

"It's all right, *Tovarich*. We will go and get our papers."

We leave the dormitory and go out into the clean, white moonlight and descend the broken stairs to the yard.

The young woman does not speak. She is indifferent as to whether we return or not. We are fools and a bore, with our talk of documents left at the station. She lets us out into the empty street. There is a thin, reedy Oriental music coming from somewhere. Gleaming towers and ruined arches have an Arabian Nights quality of unreality in the moonlight. The shadows are black and long and strange, and not even a stray dog moves through the white stillness. What are the mysteries behind those closely shuttered windows? Who besides ourselves listens to the hidden musician?

Samarkand by moonlight! How is it possible to care very much where we lay our heads for the rest of this fantastic night? We blunder along over the cobbles, and now we do not feel

our weariness, or the steely coldness, for we walk in an enchanted land.

Presently there is a sound of footsteps behind us, and a cloaked figure emerges from the shadows.

"We might ask him if he can tell us where we might find a droshky. We'd better get back to the station. It's warm there."

The cloaked one proves to be a young militiaman. He says he will try to find us a droshky. When we get back to the square he invites us to step across to one of the houses looking on to it. We should wait inside in the warm whilst he seeks for a droshky. We follow him to a little wooden house and he raps sharply on the window. After a few moments the door opens and a boy of about fifteen who at first glance looks as though he might be Chinese, with his yellow skin, black hair, and oblique eyes, peers out.

He shows no sign of either interest or surprise at being required to shelter two foreign females in the combined shop and living-room which is his home. His face might be a mask in its impassiveness. He rolls his mattress up from the floor and invites us to be seated on a narrow straight-backed lacquered settee covered with bright, hard cushions. There is a work-bench in the window cluttered with tools. The boy's trade is that of watch and clock repairer. The floor is of red brick. There are plants on the window-sill. The place is very clean.

"You were asleep?"

"Yes."

"It is a pity to disturb you like this."

"It does not matter."

His tone is completely disinterested. He goes out of the room and we do not see him again, for there is a sound of hooves, and in a moment the militiaman is at the door to inform us of the arrival of the droshky.

We thank him cordially. His manner is civil but uneffusive. It is all right. He smiles faintly and salutes. We are dismissed, politely, but quite clearly.

"They're an undemonstrative lot in these parts!"

"The men at least are helpful, and manage not to be rude."

We huddle together on the long, bitterly cold, jog-trot drive back to the railway station.

" It'll be warm there, anyhow, and it's the ' done ' thing in Russia to sleep on a railway station ! "

" It won't be any worse than travelling hard. But I had such a fantasy about a hot bath and a clean comfortable bed at the professor's——"

" Tomorrow night perhaps——"

" There'd have been bugs and lice and God knows what at that doss-house."

" It would have been an experience."

" So will sleeping on a railway station be."

It was.

IV

SAMARKAND: NIGHT-PIECE

AT the entrance to the railway station sit two female officials. They demand our tickets. We explain that we have none; we merely wish to sit in the station waiting-room. The younger of the two, a pert thing with a headdress like a nurse's, with a dark blue veil down the back, tells us peremptorily that we can do no such thing. She tosses her head and smiles at the other woman, obviously delighted at this opportunity for exercising authority. The other woman smiles slyly and supports her friend. The waiting-room is for those catching trains. Her tone implies that the matter is settled beyond further discussion. It is her tone which infuriates us. The colour beats up into Donia's face.

She cries angrily that we cannot buy tickets at this time of the night, and that we are freezing out here and have no place to go, and she has no right to keep us out.

The two women are highly amused. They eye us insolently and with satisfaction.

"My God, if only I could speak the language!"

"It's no use getting their backs up. They *can* keep us out if they like. I'll have to climb down. *Tovarich*, please!"

"You must have tickets."

"But how can we get tickets now?"

"I will give them to you. Ten kopecks each."

It is too much, even for anyone prepared to eat dirt.

"Why couldn't you tell us that in the first place?"

They both laugh. We pay our ten kopecks each and are admitted into the warmth of the station.

"On the left," snaps the older of the two women.

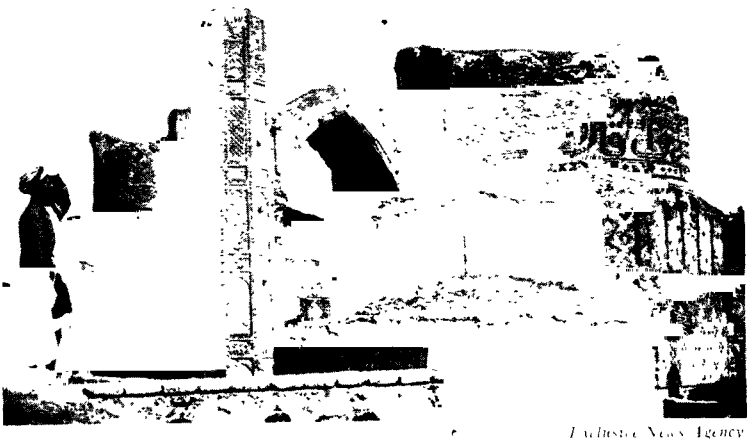
We push open the door on the left and are in a large hall with a buffet at one end. The benches in the main part of the hall are fairly full, and we go along to the buffet, which is empty, save for a few Red Army soldiers playing a variety of billiards. It would be nice, we think, to have a glass of hot tea, and perhaps there would be something to eat. . . .

The woman behind the counter tells us, contemptuously, to use our eyes; can we not see the notice up announcing that the buffet is for the Red Army only?

Abashed, we retire to a table in an out-of-the-way corner, where we flop down into two chairs, and covering our faces with our coat-collars try to sleep. In a few moments we are wakened by the voice of the woman from the buffet; she has come across to inform us that we are not allowed to sit there; it is reserved for the Red Army. . . .

We go out into the main body of the hall and search for space on a bench. We find places at last and sink down wearily and look around. There are the usual railway station waiting-room family groups, with bedding, tea-kettles, bundles, children. Opposite us are four Uzbek youths who look as though they might be students; they are neatly dressed in European clothes, but on their heads wear embroidered velvet skullcaps of different colours. On the floor at one end of the room squat four women wearing the hideous *chedrąs*, mummy-like figures in their long robes; an elderly man who also wears a robe, and a skull-cap, is in charge of them; they are his wives; harems consisting of three or four wives still exist. Several women have babies at their breasts. There are a number of ragged men who are obviously not travellers but homeless ones sheltering for the night. (Approaching the station we observed several figures huddled in doorways—presumably those who lacked ten kopecks for admission to the waiting-room.) There is very little conversation. Men and women sit sleeping with their heads nodding forward on their breasts; others are stretched out at full length on the benches; others again merely sit and stare.

Planet News



Exclusive News Agency

Above : VEILED UZBEK WOMAN, SAMARKAND
The ' veil '—*chedras*—is of black horsehair.

Below : THE RUINS OF THE MOSQUE OF BIBI-KHANUM, SAMARKAND
Showing clearly the patterns of the torquoise and lapis-lazuli coloured mosaic and faience.

After a while Donia and I decide that we might as well try to get some sleep. We stretch ourselves out full length and cover our faces with our coat collars. The benches seem harder than the deck of the Caspian Sea steamer; but other people seem to get to sleep, and we are desperately tired. We settle down resolutely.

Only to be wakened a few minutes later by someone rocking the bench. Looking up, indignantly, we see the woman official with the flowing veil with her hand on the back of the bench, and that sadistic smile on her face. Everyone on the bench sits up, rubbing their eyes, grumbling. The woman with the veil moves over to the next bench and rocks that. Those who do not wake with the rocking of the bench she goes to and shakes by the shoulder. Smiling, all the time smiling, amused, enormously conscious of her power, exulting in it.

Donia sits up, demands of her: "Why can't you let us sleep? We are doing no harm. What does it matter whether we sleep or stay awake?"

Unruffled, smiling, delighted by the dismay and consternation she is causing, the woman answers blandly: "It is against the regulations."

In the next aisle the other woman official performs the same sadistic office.

When they have passed to the other end of the hall, out of sight, we all fling ourselves down again. But it is only for a few minutes. The women have started at this end of the hall again. One man refuses to budge. Donia distracts attention from him by demanding, more passionately than before: "Why can't you leave us alone?" The woman, smiling insolently, demands: "Why can't *you* go to the hotel?"

We put up no further resistance after that. We are afraid. The woman has only to call the militia for that glimpse of Samarkand by moonlight to be all we may know of it. We are obviously, from our clothes, foreigners and not poor; that we choose to spend a night like this instead of going to the hotel is highly suspicious. We remove ourselves to a corner and give up trying to stretch out. The man beside Donia is leaning against the back of the man next to him, who is in turn leaning against the back of the man next to him, who has his head on

his arms on the window-sill behind him. Donia leans against the last man, and I lean against her. We are very nearly comfortable for a little while and doze off—only to be wakened with a start. The man on the window-sill has cramp and has stirred and sat up, dislodging the humanity piled on top of him.

"When father says turn we all turn! What's the time?"

"Half-past two."

"Is that all?"

"Why don't you lean on the man next to you? The man he's leaning on looks as though he'd sleep for ever."

"He smells. And he keeps scratching. I'm going to try sleeping sitting-up."

"I've tried that. It's very neck-ache-making. . . ."

Nevertheless, despite cramp, we sleep in patches. At five o'clock charwomen enter with swabs and pails and begin washing the floor after a fashion—that is to say they drag the wet slimy cloths over the floor and occasionally squeeze some of the black water out into their pails. The two women officials come in and start turning everyone out. There is no real need to turn us out for this farcical cleaning, but they are not to be robbed of their sadistic pleasure in harassing the unfortunates compelled for one reason or another to spend the night on the station.

Heavy-eyed and aching-bodied, we shuffle out into the entrance-hall where we make ourselves comfortable as best we can sitting on our bundles. The Asiatic husband and his harem squat in a corner; the women sit motionless, their bodies lost in the shapeless mauve and grey and dirty white *paranjas*, their faces completely invisible behind the black *chedras*, but the husband gets up occasionally and struts about—for all the world like a cock in a hen-run I find myself thinking. . . . He is a spare, wiry-looking man with a jutting beard and a confident manner. He would need confidence, surely, with four wives, though it's difficult to think of those four bundles as human beings.

About an hour later we are permitted to return to the waiting-room, but now no one attempts to sleep. It is getting light outside. We sit there, patiently waiting for the dawn; or, more exactly, for the buffet to open—which is not until seven o'clock,

and even then there is a long wait before the much-needed tea is ready.

A frightful ape-like deformed mute is being teased by some Red Army soldiers; the creature is much more like a beast than a man; but he is in uniform; he is a railway official. He makes threatening gestures to the soldiers, and dreadful guttural noises which sound like ra-ra-ra. The soldiers laugh. The creature is impatient for tea, and keeps banging on the counter with a saucer. There is something pitiful and dreadful about this travesty of a human being, and I keep thinking that if I could speak Russian I should tell the soldiers for God's sake to leave the poor creature alone. . . .

There is a good deal of grumbling all round over the long wait for the tea. We go to the counter and stare at the unappetising food displayed behind the fly-blown glass. We buy some bread and some pieces of cheese and sour cucumber, but until we have braced our energies with some hot tea, have no appetite. Outside, the sun shines brightly, and a queue is forming by the 'bus stop. Workmen go to and fro carrying huge plaster statues of workers—miners, soldiers, labourers—to be erected on the roof of the railway station as part of the November seventh celebrations which are due in a few days' time. Once we had had an idea of getting back to Moscow in time for the celebrations; we did not know, when we planned that, the difficulties of travelling to schedule on such a trip as this.

The tea comes at last, the usual insipid, tasteless stuff, but its warmth is vaguely heartening, and after a while we go off in search of a wash.

But you cannot wash on Samarkand railway station, and the latrines are holes in the ground, in a row, undivided by any screen, and with another similar row opposite, and filthy beyond description. We try to monopolise the whole place, keeping cave for each other, but the other women will not have this and are highly indignant. A line from *Hassan* comes incongruously to my mind: 'What would you, ladies? It was ever thus'. . . .

We join the 'bus queue, which by this time is very long. The 'buses are few and far between, and each 'bus takes a disappointingly few passengers. And with every 'bus there is a

minor riot; the queue degenerates into a frenzied mob, pushing, shoving, thrusting elbows into each other's faces, shouting, quarrelling; the two militiamen in charge have to fight back the mob to keep it in any semblance of a queue. There is always someone who tries to dodge round to the front of the queue and force a way into the 'bus; the mob howls with rage; the militia hurl the offender into the gutter; it is a war of words and blows . . . then the 'bus moves off, the queue subsides once more, muttering, to wait for another twenty minutes or half an hour.

After a couple of hours, during which we become miserably cold, our feet frozen, we finally enter a 'bus and are hurtled off up the long avenue of locust-trees which we covered twice the previous night. Half-way we are all turned out of the 'bus whilst it drives off from the main road to a petrol-station in a side-turning. We stand at the side of the road and watch a train of camels go swaying by, the dust flying up under their hooves in a white cloud. Ahead of them an old bearded man, wearing a turban and a quilted coat of many colours, rides a donkey with a much-scarred hide.

When the 'bus returns from the petrol station we all bundle in again and rattle along the avenue, passing flat-roofed adobe houses on one hand, and modern factories on the other. Modern Samarkand is as proud of its factories as of its university, its hospital, its dam. It has leather factories, flour-mills, distilleries, brick works, pencil factories, cotton-cleaning mills, and, outside the town, a new silk factory.

A little while ago, listening-in to Moscow because Donia was going to speak about Samarkand, I was amused to hear the announcer in his introductory remarks refer with contempt to the popular conception of Samarkand as a romantic place in a poetic play. One gathered from his observations that in modern Samarkand life was real, life was earnest; that it had, in fact, fallen into line as an industrial city of the Uzbek S.S.R., part of the great U.S.S.R. and finished with all that romantic Asiatic stuff. In short, Tamerlane is dead and Stalin rules in modern Samarkand, and much more than the centuries divide them. Timur bequeathed to the centuries his turquoise enamel miracles of rare device; what will the Stalinist regime leave that

will last as long? The changed face of Asia, more enduring than the monuments of Tamerlane? Cinemas, hospitals, schools . . . aeroplanes, tanks, machine-guns. A mechanised civilisation is to be Asia's heritage from Stalinism, and a mechanised civilisation means tanks as well as tractors, poison-gas as well as antiseptics. It means an existence of ruthless efficiency and an end of idling in the sun. It means Stakhanovism and the living Robot.

Upon these things I reflected as we swung along the dusty avenue with the modern factories on one side, and the little adobe houses on the other, passing laden camels and donkeys and veiled women, and petrol-stations and motor-lorries, then hurtling into the narrow cobbled street of the tea-houses in the shade of the acacias.

It must be a sweet thing on a summer evening in the streets of ancient Samarkand to sit upon a fine Bokhara rug on a little rush-roofed platform raised a few feet above the cobbles, and to sip bowls of green tea whilst the camels come swaying in with a tinkle of bells from the rice and cotton-fields, to sit there hour after hour and idly contemplate the motley of indolent Asiatic life passing in an endless coloured caravan.

But all this vivid leisurely life is doomed; the new generation is being educated according to Western ideas; it already hangs ugly European clothes upon its body, and is in process of hanging ugly European notions of civilisation upon its awakening consciousness, its Eastern philosophy invaded and inundated by Western materialism.

And so we descend from the motor-bus to stand upon the Registan.

V

TAMERLANE

THE history of ancient Samarkand is obscure, and authorities differ as to its origin. Certain outstanding facts emerge, however, and the most important of these revolve round the names of three of the greatest conquerors in the history of the world—Alexander the Great, Ghenghis Khan, and Tamerlane.

Samarkand first appears in history as Maracanda, the capital of the Achæmenian province of Sogdiana, but whether Alexander was its destroyer or its founder seems undecided. He was certainly busy in Bactria and Sogdiana—the Bokhara-Samarkand district of today—between 329 and 327 B.C., conquering the people and establishing cities. Græco-Bactrian coins are still to be found in the valley of the Zarafshan outside the city. If he destroyed Maracanda in 329, assuming that he built a new city on the ruins of the old, it could also be true, as some claim, that he stayed two years in the original Samarkand before passing on to India, which he seems to have done early in 327. If he had merely hurled his army on the city and destroyed it and passed on, he would hardly have had time to murder his friend General Clitus there in a drunken quarrel, and to snatch Roxana, the daughter of a Bactrian ruler, for a wife. Moreover, the coins found amongst the ruins known as Aphrosiab—or Afro Siab—in the Zarafshan valley also point to the Macedonian conquest being more than a passing laying-waste. These ruins in this most desolate place are all that is left of Maracanda. Here stood

the Sogdiana palace where Alexander is supposed to have held his court.

After the Hellenic interlude, Maracanda fades into obscurity, re-emerging as Samarkand under the Arabs in the eighth century. Under the Sassanids, Maracanda recovered from the barbarism into which it sank with the passing of the Alexandrian empire and became what one authority[1] calls ' an outpost of civilisation on the border of the Central Asiatic steppes from whence so many different invasions of nomads were still to pour down.'

Then in the seventh century Islam came sweeping across the desert, to destroy the Persian kingdom of the Sassanids, and the Arabs were triumphant. The Arabs gave to Samarkand an irrigation system which endures to this day, and under the Sassanids in the ninth century Samarkand became a great seat of Arabic culture for nearly two hundred years, when theTurks swept over the Kirghiz steppes, despoiling the rich lands so carefully irrigated and tended by the Arabs. After them in the thirteenth century came the Mongols under Ghenghis Khan, bringing nothing but destruction. Several generations later, his descendant, Timur, or Tamerlane, made Samarkand his capital, and under him the city blossomed as the rose. Some of the petals of that superb flowering survive to this day.

After Tamerlane, in the sixteenth century, came the Uzbeks, nomad tribes from the north, and by the eighteenth century Samarkand appears to have fallen into decay again to the point of being almost a deserted city. It fell into the hands of the Chinese for a time, and passed from them to the Emir of Bokhara, from whom it was seized by the Russian General Kaufman in 1868, when he was Governor of the newly formed province of Turkestan, and at work subduing the whole khanate of Bokhara. Thus annexed by Tsarist Imperialism it was already part of Russia, therefore, at the time of the revolution. When in 1924 the Uzbek Republic was formed, under the Soviets, Samarkand became a capital once more, industrially, and as the seat of the Uzbek government.

Polovtsoff refers to the suggestion that a King Samar, another

[1] A. Polovtsoff in *The Land of Timur* (Methuen, 1932).

great conqueror, gave his name to Samarkand, ' cand ' meaning town, and ' Samar ' having no meaning unless it be a name, but if there was such a conqueror, outside of legend, there appears to be nothing on record concerning him, and ' Samarcand ' might as easily be a corruption of the original name Maracanda. Samar is supposed to have lived in the seventh century, the century in which ' Samarcand ' as opposed to Maracanda, makes its debut in history.

The Tadjiks were the earliest people in Samarkand. They were a Persian race and highly civilised, and there are still a large number of Persians, Iranians, and Tadjiks, in the population of the old town, which, with the Uzbeks, is something over a hundred thousand. In 1931 the population of the new town was about 20,000.

It has been suggested that Tamerlane was not interested in any renaissance of art and beauty in Samarkand, but that his object in building lavishly and spectacularly was purely for trade-purposes and self-advertisement. It is certainly significant that there is no indication of any revival of art and letters accompanying the architectural renaissance, and that Tamerlane built shoddily is evidenced by the tragic state of decay into which his mosques and mausoleums, minarets and madrasahs, have fallen in the course of not more than five centuries. A few more decades and they will probably vanish altogether. Possibly, in the course of the next few years, even. In the Registan columns have had to be chained into position to prevent them crashing. The madrasah of Bibi-Khanum has been evacuated, and the great Koran stone moved out into the open for safety's sake. There is an enormous crack across the remaining half of the dome, and the ground all round is strewn with fallen tiles. An earthquake tremor or a big storm and the crumbling edifice must surely crash. It used to grieve old Professor Viatkin who, up till the time of his death in 1934, was head of the Commission on Ancient Monuments, and responsible for the preservation of Samarkand's ruins, that with the limited and inadequate funds the government allotted him, he could do so little. Anna Louise Strong describes him as ' a kindly and rather sad gentleman, not interested in politics or in all the fury of new building in this old capital,' but ' well aware of the world importance of the great

historic monuments', and hurt by the realisation of the little he could do to save them from becoming part of the dust of Asia.

The bricks from which Tamerlane built were made from the loess of the Zarafshan valley; they were faced with clay, and glazed in turquoise and cobalt blues—lovely beyond words to look at, but very brittle, and the glaze of incredible thinness. I have some of these tiles in my possession, excavated from the deep dust in which Bibi-Khanum stands, and builders who have examined them are amazed that so soft a brick and so thin a glaze should have endured the ravages of weather through the centuries.

But these glittering clay structures of Tamerlane are all too clearly doomed. Tamerlane built for show, not for eternity. He wanted Samarkand to be the 'Queen of Asia', and it was. It is said to have been as luxurious as Babylon at its height. Tamerlane was 'overlord of Asia from Moscow to the Wall of China', and he made the bazaar-town that was his capital the most brilliant shop-window of Central Asia for the caravans of the trade routes between East and West. To appreciate the importance of Samarkand as a shop-window, it is only necessary to look at the map. It was the cross-roads for merchants coming from India, China, from Kabul, from Persia, to trade with the oases between the Aral Sea and the Pamirs.

There is, then, this picture of Tamerlane as the astute merchant-prince with an appreciation of the powers of advertisement, building spectacularly but shoddily, for his self-aggrandisement and to make Samarkand the show-place of Central Asia for the purpose of attracting trade, Tamerlane the barbarian conqueror with no appreciation of or interest in art and culture, building with slave-labour, picking the brains of captive craftsmen, a vulgarian creating beauty by accident . . . and there is the romantic—and far less likely—picture of Tamerlane the Great, adorning Samarkand like a beloved mistress, hanging her with precious jewels, calling upon artists and craftsmen to serve her out of the riches of their imagination and with the genius of their hands; Tamerlane the master-artist, Tamerlane the saviour of mankind, Tamerlane the beneficent, Tamerlane creating beauty because he was himself so ugly.

Marlowe offers a picture of him glorifying Samarkand out of the vanity which was part of his lust for power:

> " Then shall my native city Samarcanda,
> And crystal waves of fresh Jaertis' stream,
> The pride and beauty of her princely seat
> Be famous through the farthest continents;
> For there my palace royal shall be placed,
> Whose shining turrets shall dismay the heavens,
> And cast the fame of Ilion's tower to hell;
> Through the streets, with troops of conquered kings,
> I'll ride in golden armour like the sun;
> And in my helm a triple plume shall spring,
> Spangled with diamonds, dancing in the air,
> To note me Emperor of the three-fold world. . . ."

Samarkand, of course, was not his native city, for he was born at Shahr-i-Sabz, known as the 'Green City', in Kesh, in the then Khanate of Bokhara; but possibly Marlowe used the term 'native city' as implying Tamerlane's spiritual home. Certainly Marlowe's picture of him as a 'monster that hath drunk a sea of blood, And yet still gapes for more to quench his thirst', the megalomaniac tyrant who harnessed the captive kings of Asia to draw his chariot, who sacked and burned and massacred in a mad lust for power, keeps closer to the known facts of history than does the romantic picture which sees in the record of his cruelties 'the natural consequence of his age and of the work he had to perform', and which 'merely enhances his fame with a halo of dreadful severity', which is Polovtsoff's view. (But Polovtsoff is clearly on the side of the war-lords, for he defends Alexander's murder of General Clitus on the grounds that when the Greeks got to Samarkand they gave up mixing water with their wine, because the water of the Zarafshan was too muddy, 'So, willy-nilly, the conquerors of Asia were very often in their cups. I believe, therefore, that the murder of poor tactless Clitus was more a consequence of the natural conditions of Samarcand than of a criminal outburst on Alexander's part.')

I like immensely the picture of Tamerland attempting to speed-up the building which was to embellish Samarkand by squatting beside the foundations and throwing meat and money

down to the workers for their encouragement. Poor old Tamerlane—how he would have welcomed a Stakhanov on the job ! But Tamerlane's idea of a shock-brigade was ninety captured elephants from India which were used for conveying stones from the quarries.

Legend has it that Tamerlane was of immaculate conception, his mother being impregnated by a sun's ray. ' Tamerlane ' is supposed to be a corruption of Timur-Leng, or Timur-the-Lame. He was also called ' the Iron Limper '. Timur means shake, and certainly the whole of Asia trembled before his invading and destroying armies. At thirty-three, the age at which Alexander died, he was the Emperor of Asia.

In addition to being lame, he was blind in one eye, and had the reputation for being the ugliest man in Asia. (Marlowe, however, describes him as tall and straight, strongly built, pale, lofty browed, and makes no mention of his limp.) In spite of this he had nine wives, of whom the favourite was Bibi-Khanum, a Chinese princess.

Clavijo's description of the court of Tamerlane, of his apparel, and that of his wives, reads like a description[1] of Solomon in all his glory. He drank from golden cups and banqueted from golden tables; wine was served in gold and silver jugs; his tents were hung with silk and sables, and his idea of interior decoration seems to have been walls of gold and silver studded with innumerable precious stones. He conceived not merely conquest on a vast scale, but magnificence in everything with which his name was associated. Thus, when he built an arch he required that it should be rivalled only by the Milky Way; when he commanded a cupola to be designed its sweep and blueness needs must invite comparison with nothing less than the sky. Here you have either the imagination of the poet—or the tendency to paranoia.

So he is to be pictured, then, this barbarian tyrant, this Oriental Caliban, so ugly that he could not bear to look at himself in a mirror, this ' scourge of God ' who had pyramids built of the skulls of the men his armies slew at his command, this megalomaniac imperialist and war-lord, sitting amongst all this

[1] In *The Narrative of the Embassy of Ruy Gonzales de Clavijo to the Court of Timur* (published by the Hakluyt Society in 1859).

burning beauty that God alone could rival, surrounded by his silken-robed, bejewelled women, their faces smothered in the white lead paste that was the cosmetic of the time, and, dimming the blueness of the Asiatic sky, the cobalt and turquoise mosques and minarets he had commanded to be built to the glory of Samarkand and as a monument to the greatness of Tamerlane, and dreaming of Babylon, of Baghdad, of Aleppo and Damascus, of Turkey dangling like a bracelet bauble at his conqueror's wrist, and the Sultan one more captive king in great Timur's train . . . then on to China.

But he never added China to the list of campagins :

" And shall I die and this unconquered ? "

The gods decreed that he should, and, humiliatingly, not in battle, but of a fever, when encamped at Otrar, at the far side of the Syr-Daria. The terror of the world who had slain his ten thousands learned that he too must die, miserably, without dignity or glory, but like any other old man who falls ill and has not the strength to resist the assault of a germ upon his body.

His embalmed body was brought to Samarkand to the mosque prepared for it, and his soul, no doubt, went marching on to worlds as yet unconquered. He was probably less than seventy when he died, though Clavijo, Spanish Ambassador at the Court of Henry III of Castille, and many times a guest at the court of Timur, describes him in the years before his death as so old that his eyelids were dropping down. He is said to have been subject to ' visions ' all his life, and was possibly epileptic, as other tyrants have been.

Not all the glory that was—and in a broken splendour still is—Samarkand, came into being at Tamerlane's command. The three madrasahs (Muslim colleges) on the Registan, Ulug-Beg, Shir-Dar, and Tilli-Kari, were built by his grandson Ulug-Beg. (The original Shir-dar and Tilli-Kari buildings were destroyed by earthquake in the sixteenth century and rebuilt in their present form as copies of the Ulug-Beg mosque.) It is often asserted that the Bibi-Khanum mosque, beyond the remains of the walls of the city, was built by Tamerlane's favourite wife, after whom it is named, but this is more likely legend than history. The Shakh-Zinda, Tamerlane's summer palace, and the mauso-

leum of various of his relatives, and the Gur-Emir, the mosque he had erected to serve as his own tomb when the time should come, are certainly Tamerlane's own creations, so that though not all the glory of Samarkand is his, his are its greatest glories. What he created was not excelled during his life-time, nor after it. When Tamerlane himself commanded that there should be beauty and splendour, human imagination and human energy were strained to the utmost. At his command blood flowed and beauty flowered. But a mortal and perishable beauty, doomed to perish out of its due time and become again a part of the dust of Asia.

First and last Tamerlane was a destroyer; bringing no culture to Samarkand he gave it a physical beauty, but no immortal soul such as rests with the bloom of eternity upon the glory that was Greece and the splendour that was Rome.

And now, if you will jump that dry ditch and cross the narrow cobbled street with the two dusty figures you last saw standing beside an auto-bus, we will enter that square which is possibly the most beautiful anywhere in the world—the Registan.

VI

THE REGISTAN

THE fact that the Registan is railed off from the street by a low untidy balustrade gives it the feeling of being more of a college quadrangle than of a public square, though actually it is the heart of the old town. It has always been both market-place and place of worship, and Mahometans still assemble there every Friday and on feast-days. From the minarets every day the muezzin calls the Faithful to prayer, for though the education of the younger generation discourages religion, those of the older generation unconverted to the modern outlook are free to practise their religious beliefs as they please, and throughout the Soviet union, even in Moscow itself, they may be observed uninterruptedly doing so.

The first impression on entering the Registan is of a cobbled courtyard enclosed by cloisters. The cloister effect is produced by rows of doors in alcoves under ogival arches. Each madrasah has one huge main archway set in a square wall of mosaic. The chimney-like minarets, of shining pale blue and dark blue tiles arranged in geometric patterns, rise on either side the main arches, and the buildings are crowned with cupolas which are frequently described as melon-shaped, but which it would be more exact to say are like the half of a cantaloupe, for melon-shaped does not convey the ribbed effect which characterises all the domes of Samarkand. Façades, minarets, cupolas, archways—all are blue, delicate blue-green and deep pure cobalt. Moonlight mists it all to a pastel softness, but in sunlight it is glitteringly brilliant,

sea-green, sky-blue, dazzling. Before the tiles began to fall away, leaving ugly patches of yellow-brown clay, it must have been a flawless dream of beauty, but even in ruins it is the perfect introduction to the wonders of Samarkand, because it urges that there cannot be anything more beautiful and remarkable than this, that Tamerlane himself could not have built with more fantastic imaginativeness; whereas, since the miracle of miracles is that they happen, the shining beauty of the Registan is proved to be only an overture to the Tamerlane concerto. The first sad lovely movement of which begins with the Bibi-Khanum, mounts to a superb climax with Shakh-Zinda, and in the final movement reverts to sadness and tragedy as with a solemn beat of funereal drums it concludes with the Gur-Emir, the tomb of Tamerlane.

But as an overture to greater beauty to come the Registan is quite unforgettable. It is the beginning of comprehension of all that is involved in the word 'incomparable' as applied to Samarkand.

In the centre of the great square is a waterless fountain. Scaffolding barricades one of the arches. Round the fountain stands are being erected in preparation for the November 7th celebrations. On the pavement outside ramshackle booths have been built against the ancient walls. In the middle of the square opposite, where the 'buses stop, there is a hideous tin hut, more like a urinal than an office of militia. But no ugliness can invade this triumphant beauty. It lifts the gaze from the squalor of pavements to the everlasting blue to which its minarets aspire.

Robed figures squat on a carpet outspread on the cobbles, a large teapot before them. They hail us from a distance to come and drink *chai*. We return their friendly smiles, but decline the invitation; there is too much to see; in the bewilderment of initiation we are not yet ready to sit and stare. . . .

Some of the doors in the alcoves are open, revealing rough stone-floors, white-washed walls, sticks of furniture. These cells, once occupied by the students of the madrasahs, are now the homes of all kinds of people—including tourists. The cells of the Tilli-Kari mosque are converted to use as a tourist hostel. Ella Maillart stayed there, and the author of *From Moscow to Samarkand*. Ella Maillart's neighbour was a potter. Duranty

writes of finding an old Mullah in one of the cells—he does not specify in which mosque—and in another a Russian archæologist who had been there since 1890 and whose chief regret was that he had not seen Samarkand before the earthquake of 1886 which did so much damage to its ruins, particularly to the mosque of Bibi-Khanum. (Duranty, incidentally, quotes this archæologist as telling him that Tamerlane built this mosque in memory of his favourite wife, which fits in better with history than the more usual story that the mosque was built during Bibi-Khanum's lifetime and at her command. But of that story more later.) The Tilli-Kari has an upper storey of pointed arches flanking its great central archway. Tilli-Kari means in Persian Golden Mosque. Opposite the Ulug-Beg, the oldest and most important of the madrasahs, rises the Shir-Dar, in exact replica.

Behind the Shir-Dar we come to a bazaar—a series of arcades under a high domed roof. There is a dense crowd here, Oriental, motley; veiled women, shapeless inhuman bundles in the flowing robe of the *paranjas*, reaching over their heads and down to their feet, their faces completely hidden behind the black *chedras*, a few unveiled women wearing coloured velvet skull-caps on their dark hair. But mostly the crowd is male, a dense throng of padded coats, flowered robes, turbans, velvet caps, huge round fur busbies, shaggy verminous-looking sheepskins; handsome, fine-featured Persian faces, flat, yellow Mongolian faces, old bearded Jews, young, alert-looking Uzbeks, brown-skinned, clean-shaven, brightly robed, gay embroidered plush or velvet caps on the backs of their heads. One alleyway of the bazaar is devoted entirely to little open-fronted shops in which old men squat making these caps. There are stacks of caps of all colours piled up on shelves and in the two corners of the back wall of the booth; some are very handsome in their gaudy fashion, with tassels and embroideries in gold or silver thread; others are very richly and cunningly embroidered in a multitude of coloured silks. But the turban still predominates in Samarkand. It is the struggle between Europe and Asia; the embroidered skull-cap is the compromise between the turban of the Faithful and the head-dress of the godless West. It symbolises and typifies the conflict between Asiatic tradition and European modernism, religious, political, moral, social.

Another alleyway of the bazaar is entirely devoted to metal-work, bracelets, ear-rings, brooches. But there is nothing you cannot buy in this covered market, from fancy goods—silk stockings, yards of lace, bottles of perfume, silk handkerchiefs—to hot greasy-looking cakes, a cross between fritters and doughnuts. It is hard work getting through the crowd. We appear to be the only Europeans, but nobody heeds us. We are part of this motley of all races. No one is odd in Turkestan.

Beside the bazaar, an oasis of shade in the dazzling sunlight, is a row of *chai-khanas*, fine carpets spread on their rickety-looking floors, robed figures squatting before large and small teapots, brown fingers clasping frail round bowls of milkless and sugarless very weak and almost tasteless tea. At the back of one of these tea-houses a man is frying some pieces of meat over a fire of sticks on a primitive hearth of bricks. We watch him for a moment and he looks up and smiling pleasantly invites us to take tea. Two old men squatting at the front of the low, carpet-covered platform smilingly endorse the suggestion. They have brown faces, jutting grey beards, white turbans. Fine eagle-like faces. On the floor beside one of them lies an odd-looking wooden musical instrument. They will play and sing to us if we stay. . . . We smile back at them, but move out into the sunlight again. In the street beyond there is a traffic of camels and donkeys, an endless procession of black veils and coloured robes. We are heavy with the ache and weight of unslept sleep. But there is so much to see. We are the pilgrims who must go, always a little further. . . .

We stumble on over the cobbles and become part of the motley of the Samarkand street-scene.

VII

BIBI-KHANUM

THE street is narrow and crowded; uneven pavement and cobbled roadway alike throng with grubby bundles of humanity; the only advantage in keeping to the pavement is that there you at least avoid being trodden on by donkeys, colliding with cumbersome bullock-waggons, and having bad-tempered looking camels snarling over your head. On the other hand, on the pavement you stand a good chance of being shoved into the water-filled ditch at the side of the road, or cutting across the pavement itself. The pavement is impossibly narrow. You cannot stop and look in at a shop without being in the way; as a number of people stop and look in at the open fronts of the shops it is frequently necessary to step over the ditch and into the road, where you are probably nearly run down by a fierce-looking bearded and turbaned creature on a donkey which appears several sizes too small for its rider. To pause on the pavement is to be jostled on all sides. There is no equivalent of 'Excuse me' in Turkestan—or for that matter anywhere in Russia—if you want to pass anyone and experience any difficulty in doing so you use your elbows and shoulders, and if the body you wish to pass does not yield you treat it as though it could be walked through or over or both.

There is a considerable crowd outside the butcher's shop. It is a very small shop, little more than a booth, and like most of the shops it has a couple of rough steps up to its door above the pavement. There are a number of oxtails and pieces of meat

hanging from the ceiling on hooks; the meat is dark and repulsive-looking, and is probably horse-flesh and camel-flesh. There is a row of blacksmiths, with a forge at the back of the shop and an anvil resting on the ground. There is a similar succession of tinkers, cobblers, leather-workers, metal-workers, carpenters, on both sides of the road. All the shops are small, three-sided, open-fronted. In several shops bronze jugs stand on the floor, displayed for sale; in the background hover figures wearing padded coats, or floral robes belted with triangular scarves or handkerchiefs, on their heads turbans or skull-caps.

At a street-corner, spread out on the ground on a sheet of newspaper held down by stones, is what at first glance looks like tobacco; closer inspection ascertains that it is green tea spread out to dry in the sun. At intervals along the road low carpet-covered platforms on trestles, a wooden post at each corner supporting a roof, accommodate old men who appear to squat there all day long drinking tea. There are never any women to be seen drinking tea in public in this fashion; it is simply 'not done'. There are also comparatively few of the younger men to be seen amongst the greybeards. It is essentially an Eastern habit belonging to the older generation. Anna Louise Strong quotes a disgusted Russian in Samarkand as complaining that 'Those old men take their tea as seriously as one does the Revolution!' She also quotes Russians in Samarkand as complaining that 'Samarkand is hard to work in, that progress goes slowly'. It is always the trouble with subject peoples that they never know what is good for them. 'It is true the Russians haven't got to go to the trouble of dropping bombs on these backward people like Mussolini in the case of those tiresome Abyssinians in order to make them take to civilisation; all that spade work was done for the Russians years ago by that efficient Tsarist Imperialist General Kaufman, so the present-day Russian, filled with Stalinist missionary zeal for remaking Central Asia on Moscow lines, can conveniently forget that actually Russia has as little business in Central Asia as Italy has in Abyssinia, or as the British have in India. The emergence of an Asiatic proletariat for the establishment of socialism; or socialism forced upon peoples by nature nomadic or contemplative? There are the two points of view.

Yet another version of the story is that Bibi-Khanum was a sister of Tamerlane's, that she died young, and that he erected the mosque in memory of her.

History, through Tamerlane's contemporary biographer, Sherif-Ed-Din, upsets the romantic legend in all its versions by recording that Tamerlane had the mosque built in memory of his favourite wife a few years before his death, and that he personally superintended its construction as late as the year of his death. It was partly destroyed by General Kaufman's armies in 1868, and further havoc was caused by the earthquake of 1886, though the great dome fell four years before then. All that is left now is the vast arch, the minarets, and half of the cupola, yet the beauty that survives is astonishing.

The ruin stands in a wide dusty courtyard planted with little trees, and in the centre of which, mounted on two cobbled steps, is the huge Koran stand imported by Ulug-Beg from Mongolia, and moved out of the mosque and into the open for safety after the earthquake. It consists of two huge wedges of carved stone supported on low pillars. Barren women are supposed to be made fertile by crawling at morning, fasting, between the arches formed by these pillars. The immensely high blue arch rises behind the Koran stone on the far side of the square. Its soaring Gothic sweep gives it a cathedral grace which redeems with a proud austerity the tragedy of its broken beauty. The blues and blue-greens of mosaic and faience are dazzling in the sunlight. The cupola is a mere broken shell, and so badly cracked that it gives one the feeling of imminent danger to stand beneath it, but its turquoise loftiness has such a spirit of belonging to the sky that its crash would be like the heavens falling. The minarets which flank the arch are octagonal, and for this reason less like factory chimneys than those of the Registan.

All round this proud lovely pile the dust is strewn with rubble, clay bricks—and excrement. The whole site appears to be used as a public latrine, and at the back and sides of the ruin it is necessary to pick one's way with extreme care. The smell all round the place attacks the back of my throat and remains with me for the greater part of the day. I want to remember only beauty, but I know that I shall never be able to recall the winged beauty of that arch without involuntarily recalling also the foul-

ness out of which it rises. Irresistibly I am reminded of George Sand and her finding of a rare plant growing by the Abbey of St. Georges, which she visited with Flaubert: "I was enchanted; there was much —— in the neighbourhood where I gathered it. Such is life! And if one does not take life like that, one cannot take it in any way, and then how can one endure it? I find it amusing and interesting. . . ."[1]

The dust is soft and deep. I bend to pick up a piece of turquoise pricking up through the dust like a bright flower, and find that it does not move. I drop down beside it and begin delving with my fingers. Our joint efforts and the use of a jack-knife finally unearth a complete tile. After this we begin to look out for blue specks in the dust, and when at last we leave the courtyard our pockets are bulging with trophies.

The site of Bibi-Khanum is enclosed by a low wall of loose stones. Beyond, a honeycomb of squat clay houses tails away into a wasteland of desert desolation, sand-dunes, bare hills, scrubby bushes white with dust, a grey mosque perched at the crest of a low arid hill, crumbling ruins, their gaunt grief unrelieved by colour or form. On the edge of this wilderness we find a dusty market-place seething with people, though there appears to be little enough being offered for sale. There are bundles of hay and grass, piles of parsnips and melons, bundles of faggots, and a few merchants wandering about displaying lengths of ugly printed cotton materials which attract a good deal of attention; small crowds gather round, fingering the material, holding lengths of it against themselves; there is eager bargaining. . . . Old men squat on the ground before collections of brown, yellow and dull red gourds of the shape and size of pears and fitted with boar's-brush stoppers. There are a great many tethered donkeys and mules, and in one corner of the uneven ground, beyond a collection of flimsy-looking waggons, each like a wide ladder set between two disproportionately high wheels, a number of camels snarling and growling as they kneel in the dust. Some of the soft-coated young females look quite gentle, but the males are mangey and spiteful-looking brutes. I sit down on a boulder and watch them, fascinated, filled with mingled

[1] *The George Sand–Gustave Flaubert Letters*, translated by Aimee McKenzie, published by Duckworth & Co. (1922).

feelings of pity and disgust. They have sullen, sneering faces and verminous-looking coats, and they snarl and saliva unpleasantly, but sometimes they make sounds of sheer agony—more agonising, even, than the long-drawn sobbing of a donkey's bray. Poor hideous tormented beasts with the cruel wooden pegs thrust through their nostrils. . . . A small brown-faced boy wearing a large floppy straw-hat, and with bare legs and feet, clambers about over them, fearlessly, prodding them to their feet. The creatures moan and growl. The boy laughs, with a flash of white even teeth and a sparkle of black eyes as he glances in our direction, self-consciously. He is joined by a man in a long dirty white robe and a straw hat like his own, and between them they get some half-dozen of the beasts to their feet and lead them away in single file, with a soft jingling of bells and a rising smoke of white dust.

We wander back towards the town. For some distance beyond the square in the shadow of Bibi-Khanum the market continues along a straggling piece of waste-ground inches deep in dust. Old men squat before their piles of green and yellow striped melons, or are busy scraping out the insides of gourds. Farther on, a large ugly modern building with big windows and a red-draped façade; a long queue, mostly composed of women, reaches right round the building; it is a State stores. There is a big display of tinned goods in the windows.

We come back to the Registan and, crossing the open space where the 'buses stop, enter the narrow cobbled street which so far we have only seen from the 'bus windows, and by moonlight as we clattered along in the droshky the night before. More than the Registan, more than the market-place beside Bibi-Khanum, more than the crowded street which leads to Bibi-Khanum, or the bazaar behind the Shir-Dar, this street of tea-houses will always seem to me the very heart and the living spirit of Samarkand, the ancient Samarkand—and that despite the fact that some of the tea-houses are Red;[1] and many of those which are not were at that time draped with red, in preparation for November 7th. *Chai-Khanas* flank the pavements and occupy the gutters on both sides of the road; those in the roadway are set in the shadow

[1] Run by trade-unions or social organisations, such as Workers' Clubs, which in some respects they resemble.

of acacia trees; those on the pavement are three-sided, open-fronted. There is in this street a sense of life flowing indolently, contemplatively; it is the street of the tea-drinkers, the idlers, those content to sit in the sun on the side-walk of life, unconcerned with progress and sunrise in the West; content with their own century-old civilisation of the East.

It is a street which has all the intimacy of the market-place and the bazaar, a gay and heedless little street, full of eating-houses with unglazed windows open on to the pavement, a street of rickety wooden houses with overhanging balconies, a street in which little twisted trees make shadow-patterns on the cobbles; on a corner a woman squats with her back against a white wall, a pile of green apples at her feet; she balances scales in one hand, using stones of different sizes for weights; the bright warm colours of Bokhara rugs on the wooden platforms of *chai-khanas* in the gutter glow in the bright clear sunlight; turbans gleam and plush caps make brilliant splashes of colour; an Oriental crazy-patchwork of a street, flowing between the Registan at one end and the broad boulevards of the new town at the other, the link between oldest Asia and newest Europe, between Tamerlane's Samarkand and Stalin's.

VIII

MODERN SAMARKAND

IN modern Samarkand—that is to say the new town—the streets are called, as might be expected, by such names as Leninskaia, Karl Marxkaia, and a public park is called 'Early May'. There are fine public buildings, and the broad boulevards are thickly planted with tall trees and are very beautiful. It is altogether an admirable example of a well-planned and prosperous modern city.

By the time we arrive at the university we are almost dropping with weariness, and ravenously hungry. It is early afternoon, and we have eaten nothing since a bad and greasy meal on the train the evening before. That we have not washed properly since we left Baku five days ago, and are completely unwashed from our night on the railway station, adds in some way to the general exhaustion. In addition to our two nights on the Caspian Sea and at Krasnovodsk, two nights on a train and a night on a railway station, we had stood for hours in the 'bus queue that morning, and have been tramping about over rough cobbles ever since, so the intense fatigue is perhaps understandable. We have anyhow reached the stage of stumbling every few steps from sheer physical exhaustion, and are sunk in a silent sullen misery.

An old porter at the door of the university studies the envelope of our letter addressed to Professor X, and finally decides that we have come to the wrong wing of the university; the faculty we want is in another part of the building, a half mile or so away.

We stumble away through sunlight that has now become hateful to us.

We are sick with weariness, ready to weep with it. We trudge on. Another imposing modern building. Another aged porter. Another lengthy inspection of our by now grubby envelope.

" Professor X is not here."

" Oh my God ! " Then in Russian, " When will he return ? "

" In a few days perhaps."

We stare blankly at each other.

" Now what ? "

" I don't know. Ask him to let us sit down a minute, or I'll collapse."

A pleasant-faced Uzbek lad comes down the corridor.

" Quickly—ask him if he can say when Professor X will be back."

The young Uzbek fingers the envelope thoughtfully.

" We have nowhere to stay in Samarkand. We had relied on the professor putting us up."

" There is the hotel——"

" It is closed." And hastily, " It would be too expensive anyhow." Then in English, " Shall we tell him the truth ? "

" No. Too risky. He is probably a good law-abiding Communist."

" Here is a friend of Professor X. Let us speak with him——"

We follow the young Uzbek into an office opening out of the corridor. Behind a desk stands a short dark middle-aged man wearing a black felt hat and horn-rimmed spectacles, and astonishingly like Ernst Toller. We learn later that he is Russian. The student speaks with him, hands him the unsealed envelope. The professor takes out the letter and stares at it. It is obvious that he cannot read English.

Donia translates. The professor regards us with interest.

" You are English ? "

" Yes. The letter is from an English friend in England to Professor X, to introduce us. We had hoped he would put us up, or anyhow tell us where we could stay."

Student and professor confer together.

" Your friend does not speak Russian ? "

"No."

"German?"

"No. A little French."

"Then we will speak French. I should like it if you would both come and stay in my house with myself and my wife."

His French is slow and painstaking, and therefore, for me, easy to follow.

"*Vous-êtes très gentil, M'sieu'*." I think we are both nearly in tears with relief.

So. It is settled. We will go straight away to his apartment where we may rest.

But first we must eat. Is there perhaps a restaurant near-by?

No. Not for some distance. But there is a restaurant here in the university; we may eat here if we wish. . . .

If we wish!

He conducts us to a bare cool, clean room with a glass-fronted counter at one end. There is disappointingly little to eat. The professor explains that it is not yet time for the midday meal in the university, but we can take now, perhaps, a glass of milk and a piece of cheese, and eat later, after we have been to his apartment.

We take glasses of sour milk and some stale sweet scones and eat ravenously. The professor sits at the table with us and studies us with great interest. We tell him, between mouthfuls, the story of how we tried to telephone to Professor X, and how nowhere in Samarkand, save locked up in the hotel, was there a telephone directory.

"Professor X has no telephone. Very few people in Samarkand yet have telephones."

We do not say anything about the previous night, but let him think that we arrived only that morning. We do not want to confess that we have no permits. We cannot afford to. For all we know he may have strong views on the subject of illegal conduct, and it might mean the disappearance of that much-needed bed for the night. . . . (If ever you read this, Professor, forgive us; you have at least a clear conscience concerning us; it is possible that had you known our strictly illegal position, with expired visas, and no Turkestan permit, you might, out of

pity for our exhausted condition, have taken us in; but it is better you should have done so not knowing. . . .)

When we have taken the first edge off our appetites we go with the professor to his house. The houses of the professors are behind the university, small white bungalows with verandahs, standing on a piece of dusty ground that has the appearance of once having been a wood, for there are numerous trees, mostly firs, between the groups of houses. There are lines of washing stretched between the trees; there is a barking of dogs, and a scampering of chickens and children. It is like entering a small village.

The professor's house is astonishingly bare. He explains that he has only just moved in; his wife is away with a son who is ill. He shares this house with Professor X. It is because Professor X is away that he can accommodate us. We may have the professor's bed. He shows us into a bare room in which there is a cupboard, a chair, and a very narrow iron bedstead. There are a great many shoes under the bed. There are no curtains at the double windows, which are covered with fly-blow. The professor is sorry that he cannot offer us two beds, but if one is of any use . . . We thank him warmly, assuring him of our gratitude, though already the hardness and narrowness of that bed has entered into our bodies aching from ship and train and railway station. . . .

We ask if we might wash. We no longer dare hope for a bath. The professor says that he will get some water for us. He takes a kettle and lets himself out at the front door and through the window we watch him crossing the yard. Not merely is there no bathroom in the house, but there is no water. If water is as short as this in Samarkand, how fares Bokhara, which depends on Samarkand for its water supply? But perhaps it is not that Samarkand is short of water—are not the streets running with it?—but that though she has a university and museums and clubs and all the rest of the amenities of civilisation, including telephones and electric light, she has not yet reached modern plumbing. If you think it odd that the university should come before the plumbing then you do not understand Soviet Russian mentality—or objectives. It is as significant that the university should come before the plumbing in Samarkand, as that time,

money, energy, should be expended building a new theatre in Tiflis whilst many people continue to live under most appalling conditions. Education, culture, production, cry the Stalinists. We can't do everything at once, but we must get the masses educated, we must give them culture, we must maintain production, for these are the outward and visible signs of progress; never mind how many thousands of people are still living under bad conditions, consider the hundreds of thousands who are now literate who previously could not read a word! Look at the nice little houses we have run up for our pedagogues—never mind that they have no baths, not even water laid on, they can go to the public-baths if they must take baths—think how cultured they are, think what culture they impart! It may be difficult for our students to keep themselves clean, but think what we are doing for them educationally, culturally! First things first! Only a bourgeois would put plumbing before education. . . .

So our professor returns with his kettle full of water, and as he cannot provide us with a basin in which to use the water we take it in turns to become human taps over a rubbish-bucket, each of us holding the kettle in turn whilst the other washes under the water pouring from its spout. It is very far from the wash we had dreamed of, but it is better than nothing. These ablutions take place in a scullery-kitchen in which there is a copper and a baking-oven, but no sink. There are no fireplaces or radiators or heating-ovens in the rooms, but an oven in the entrance-hall is supposed to heat the whole house. There is a communal W.C. for the whole colony of professors' houses at the far end of the ground, through a thin wood, and across a ditch bridged by a plank and filled with old tins and other rubbish. It has an earth-closet in a wooden hut built to accommodate two; there is a wooden division but each compartment is equally unspeakably filthy. Even professors and their families, it would seem, have not yet reached that stage of education which takes for granted a respect for the sanitary decencies.

A few yards through the wood in the other direction brings us to the restaurant of the university. The place is lively with young Uzbeks of both sexes swarming round a desk in the entrance-hall at which a woman sits distributing meal-tickets at

three roubles each. The professor takes tickets for himself and us and conducts us to a large bright dining-room with deep windows and small tables. There are flowers on the tables, and the white cloths are reasonably clean. A pleasant-looking young woman takes our order. Vegetable soup, of course, and after that a choice of meat dishes. The food is hot and good and ample. The professor exchanges smiles and friendly words with several of the students. It is all very friendly and pleasant. There are a few cursory glances in our direction, but we are not stared at. The students are very quiet; there is no gay hubbub of youth, no boisterous high spirits, nothing of the undergraduate spirit as we understand it in English universities; it is all very serious; several of the students read books at table; those who converse do so quietly.

When the meal is finished the professor suggests that we might like to return to his house and sleep for a little. But we think of that narrow iron bedstead, and anyhow the sun is shining and now that we have rested and eaten our vitality is restored to us; in Samarkand, when the sun is shining, you cannot just go and hoggishly sleep. . . . The professor, when this is explained to him, smiles. Very well, then. If we are not tired, since we have been already to the Registan and Bibi-Khanum, he would like to take us now to Shakh-Zinda, which is beyond Bibi-Khanum, and of all the monuments in Samarkand the most beautiful. We will ask the young Uzbek whom we met this morning to come with us, as he is an authority on this particular monument.

Students are sent in search of this particular student, but he is not to be found. We meet him later in the old town, but he cannot come with us; he must go and buy meat, he says, for his co-operative. . . .

We walk back through the little wood, past the collection of bungalows, and out into a wide boulevard with several rows of fine trees under which, at intervals, squat sellers of sweetmeats and roasted nuts. On a corner across the road stands a *chai-khana*, shady and inviting. We suggest that we should go and sit there and take some tea. The Professor smiles. Women never sit at *chai-khanas*, he says; it is considered scandalous. . . .

"Then let us cause a scandal!"

We cross the road and enter the tea-house and climb up on to the carpeted dais open on to the boulevard. At one end of the *chai-khana* there is a tiny kitchen containing a roaring oven on which sits a large kettle, and a stone sink. Beside the stove stands a lad with Mongolian features; the proprietor who comes forward to greet us looks so Chinese that it is difficult to believe that when he turns round there will be no pigtail. . . .

We are given a pot of tea and three small bowls. The tea is very pale, and practically tasteless. We drink a bowl each and prepare to leave. The proprietor inquires anxiously if there is anything wrong with the tea that we leave after taking so little of it.

As we walk away—having satisfied the proprietor of the *chai-khana* that we found his tea excellent, but that our Western tea-drinking capacity is not equal to that of the East—we ask the professor one or two of the things which have been puzzling us. About these tea-houses, for example—they cannot all be state controlled? No, he tells us, there is still a small amount of private enterprise permitted in Turkestan; Communism has to be introduced gradually to these backward peoples. Many of the *chai-khanas*, such as the one we have just been in, are privately owned, but there are an increasing number of Red *chai-khanas*, which being more in the nature of clubs than merely tea-drinking places are favoured by the younger people; the private, purely tea-drinking *chai-khanas* are patronised, as we may have noticed, almost entirely by old men; they will die out with the passing of this older generation. All that remains of the old regime will pass with the passing of the older generation.

We want to know about the cap-makers of the bazaar, whether that is private enterprise or not; we learn that it is state organised labour, though in this industry, too, there still remains a vestige of private enterprise. The market is of course private trading, and so is much of the bargaining in the bazaar. Moscow has the wisdom to recognise that the bazaar and the market-place are as integral a part of the life of the Oriental as his religion, and therefore does not attempt to interfere with the latter, and makes concessions in respect of the former. The hope of Stalinism lies with the rising generation, brought up to the Communist conception of life which dispenses with religion and with all forms

of private trading. At present, as has been written,[1] 'Life in Samarkand flows between two shores—that of the bazaar and that of the mazar, between streets seething with noisy traders and old, deserted holy tombs. Apropos of this contrast, the Uzbeks have a saying, "Where there are children, it is a bazaar; where there are none it is a mazar."' But that great progress has been made in the Westernisation of the Uzbeks is evidenced by the existence of this new Samarkand and all that in it is, from the great university to the numerous soda-water fountains at the street-corners.

On the way to Shakh-Zinda we pass a public-baths. There is a queue outside. The professor accounts for the queue by saying that it is the day of rest. Opposite, on a piece of dusty arid ground, there is a yellow huddle of flat-roofed adobe houses. Stalin's benign countenance beams from red streamers stretched between the acacia trees. Knock-kneed camels stand in sullen servility beside a petrol pump. A robed and turbaned figure squats only half concealed beside a scrubby roadside bush white with dust.

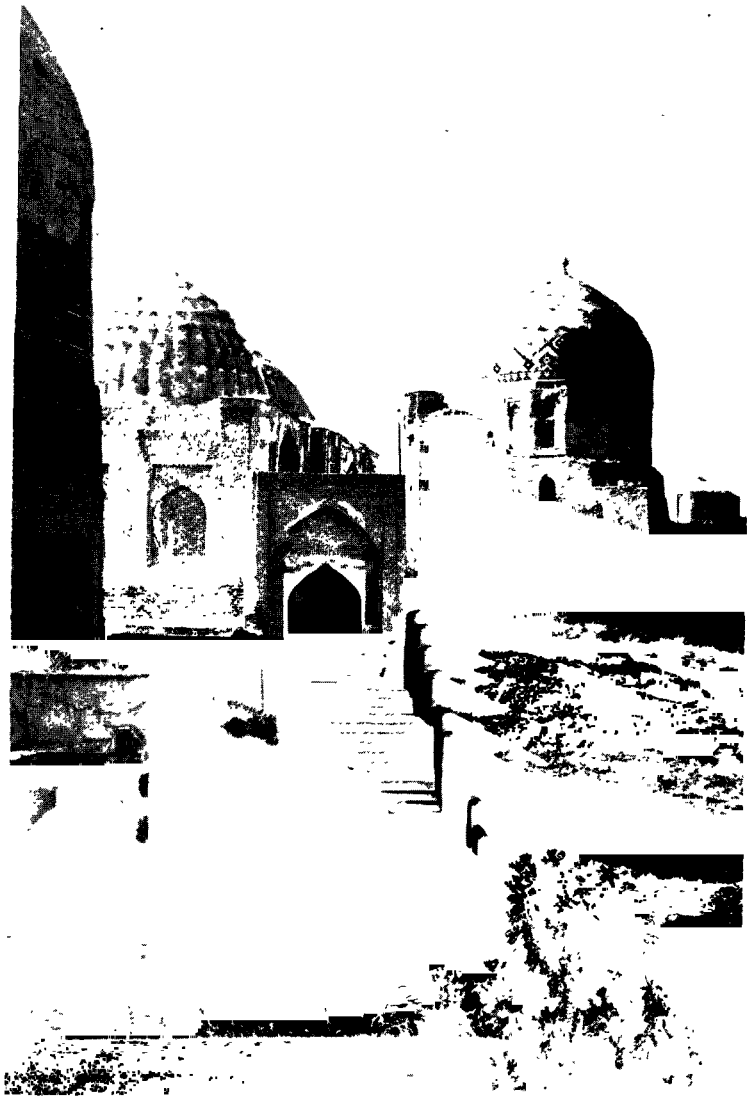
[1] *From Moscow to Samarkand*, by Y. Z. (The Hogarth Press, 1934).

IX

SHAKH-ZINDA

PAST the tea-houses at the cross-roads, opposite the bazaar, past the peasants' doss-house where we nearly spent the night, down a narrow, roughly cobbled street, running with water, teeming with people, lined on either side by little shops with unglazed windows open on to the pavements and displaying harness, knives, melons, earthenware jars of yoghourt, piles of bread, pieces of dark red meat; past cobblers, past blacksmiths, carpenters, silver-smiths, brown-faced, dark-eyed children wearing brightly coloured skull-caps, the little girls with their black hair in numerous long thin plaits, darting across one's feet; a jingle of camel and bullock bells, the clatter of high-wheeled waggons rumbling over the cobbles, the metallic ring of the hooves of patiently plodding donkeys and lively, vicious-looking mules . . . the street flows away out of the town and down to a piece of waste-ground over which the dust blows in thin swirls, and on which adobe houses squat like anthills, the colour of the earth, and part of it. Here the street ends, and the ground rises in wooded park-like slopes above a shallow valley bounded on the other side by low, burnt-looking hills, and, suddenly, a glittering huddle of blue domes. Beyond stretches a wasteland of mounds of dust and sand and crumbling tombs.

We have come to Shakh-Zinda, on the edge of the oasis of Samarkand, and the beginning of that most desolate of wildernesses, Afro Siab.



W. R. Rickmers

THE MOSQUE OF SHAKH-ZINDA, THE CROWNING SPLENDOUR OF SAMARKAND

Torquoise domes against a blue sky, and beyond the walls the desolation of Afro-Siab, where the oasis of Samarkand meets the desert.

We descend into the shallow valley and cross a road inches deep in dust. A tall narrow door stands half-open. There is a cobbled pavement leading to a long flight of steps up to an ogival arch set in a square façade, above which the great turquoise domes of the mosques tower in ethereal, dream-like loveliness. At the foot of the steps tamarisk and thorn bushes lean out over the cobbles. My heart quickens as a *Mullah* comes forward to greet us and we begin to mount the stairway. The times I have stared at a photograph in[1] *The Geographical Magazine* entitled, 'Steps leading to the mosque of Shah-Zindeh, the chief goal of Moslem pilgrims to Samarkand', and asked myself, feverishly, 'Shall *I* ever mount those steps?'! More than I wanted the storks'-nest crowned minarets of the Chor-Minar mosque of Bokhara I wanted this. . . . I could weep with joy.

The walls which flank the staircase have lost most of their tiles, leaving the ugly clay-coloured brick, but enough of the enamel is left to stir the imagination to a realisation of what that marble staircase climbing up to the great white pointed arch must have been like when it was first constructed.

At the top of the staircase, beyond the entrance arch, is a narrow, paved street of tombs of incredible beauty. Here, too, the walls have lost most of their enamel facings, but the façades of the mosques, with their exquisite mosaics and faience work of every shade of blue and green, from deepest cobalt to the palest turquoise, the austerities of geometric designs relieved by gorgeous arabesques, and the crowning glory of pale fluted domes glittering against the sky and part of its blueness, are beyond adequate description. The most minutely detailed description of their variety of colours and mosaic designs could not convey the dream-like unreality of the place. It has a mystic beauty for which there are no words.

Here lies buried Tamerlane's first wife, a son, a daughter, sister, and his nurse. Beyond the street of tombs lies a small courtyard which is a rhapsody of all the blues of heaven, with lapis-lazuli predominant.

A series of dark, vault-like rooms brings one at last to the holy of holies, the tomb of the military saint Shakh Zinda, 'The Living Shah', who, according to legend, is not dead but only

[1] August, 1935.

hidden, awaiting God's bidding to come forth and preach again the gospel of Islam. The whip which he flung away when his horse was dying, is supposed to have taken root and grown into the two thin trees which flourish to this day beside the portals of the mosque. In the dark lofty ante-chamber of the tomb horses' tails hang from long slender poles, together with tattered banners. Railed off, like the tomb, is an immense Koran, about six feet wide, recalling the stone in the courtyard of Bibi-Khanum.

In an alcove in the corridor below the ante-chamber of the saint's tomb stands a camp-bed strewn with a few rags of blankets; in a recess in the wall behind, a rifle, half a melon, and a hunk of dark bread. . . . It is weird to find these signs of life in this dream-like miniature city of the dead. The *Mullah* observes our interest and smiles. He has an intelligent brown face and alert eyes. When he smiles his teeth flash whitely above his beard. He is much interested in the electric torches which we flash on to the dark walls of the mausolea.

When we leave the tomb he unlocks a massive door and we step out on to a flat roof, a few feet below which spreads the eerie haunted desolation of Afro Siab.

This wilderness in which Samarkand originated as a Greek city offers a rich field for excavation, if the Soviets ever have time for anything as unproductive as ancient history. Here the centuries lie buried under the encroaching desert. It is a grim, an unearthly, place full of the broken brick tunnels of ancient tombs, the curved and half-submerged roofs making ant-hill-like humps amongst the sand-dunes, a shuddering place suggestive of jackals and vultures, and filled with a loneliness unutterable.

And all my life I shall remember leaving Shakh-Zinda, a dream of coloured domes, and stepping out of its afternoon sunlight into the sundown desolation of Afro Siab. We parted with the Mullah on the flat, grass-grown roof, and in a moment had passed from the spectacle of death as the spirit's freedom, an eager happy soaring into the sunlit blue, and entered the valley of the shadow, where death was dust and finality.

In a narrow track between sand-dunes tufted with coarse grass and strewn with fragments of tombs, we stand and look back at the winged loveliness of Shakh-Zinda paling in the fading light. Afro Siab is all cold shadow, as though it has never known

the warmth of the sun; the sky flames with its burden of light and warmth withdrawn from the earth; a chill wind runs over the wasteland and a profound sadness invades everything, seeping up out of the earth, streaming in a grey melancholy out of the sky. 'A savage and enchanted place'. We shiver and know that all our lives we shall remember.

X

GUR-EMIR

AS we pick our way through the twilight desolation the professor lectures us concerning the unwisdom of two young women wandering about alone in Turkestan in this fashion. The 'sailor' of Krasnovodsk was similarly emphatic, and the Commander at Nalchik. We quote Ella Maillart and her lonely wanderings. "Nothing happened to her." The professor shrugs. She was fortunate. The lives of women are still not rated very highly by many of the wild peoples of Turkestan. It is very unwise to wander about unprotected.

"Even in daylight?"

"Outside of the town, yes."

All the same we do, and nothing happens to us. Everyone is very friendly. Perhaps it is because it does not occur to us that they will be otherwise. This fear and mistrust of coloured peoples is part of an often unconscious race prejudice.

Resolved to redeem our rucksacks from the railway station where we have left them we join an immensely long 'bus queue under the glimmering walls of the Registan. It is then early in the evening, shortly after sunset; it is late night before we get back to the university, yet all we have done in that time is stand in the queue for the 'bus to the station, drink a glass of tea on the station, and stand in the queue for the 'bus back to the town; the time spent in the 'bus is only about twenty minutes, perhaps less. We have great difficulty in finding the professor's house. The

university is some distance from the 'bus stop, and we take a droshky ; we come to the right boulevard, but it is no easy matter to find the number, for between the roadway and the houses are two broad tree-lined paths, so that it is necessary to dismount from the droshky every now and then, cross the paths and inspect the houses closely. We eventually find the number the professor had given us as the house behind which the university houses are grouped, but searching behind this house all the little white houses gleaming in the moonlight look alike, and none of them exactly like the professor's house. We grow convinced that we are in the wrong quarter and return to the droshky and drive on a little farther, then descend again and make another search. When we have repeated this performance several times the droshky driver revolts and refuses to have any more to do with us.

"It does not amuse me to spend all the night in your company," he declares, crossly.

It is no use arguing with him. We stand at the side of the long white boulevard with our rucksacks at our feet and watch him drive away into the mist of moonlight.

We shoulder our rucksacks and dive once more in amongst the trees. Behind the houses flanking the farthest pavement are innumerable little white houses. A party of young people, arm in arm, singing, approach us. They cannot tell us which is Professor X's house. They stroll away, resuming their song. This search for the professor's house is assuming the quality of a nightmare. We are so desperately tired, and so utterly unequal to tramping about over cobbled courtyards and up and down the interminable boulevard looking for a white house behind another house behind another house that isn't really there. . . .

We are on the point of mild hysteria when we stumble into a courtyard and recognise a line of washing.

Through a curtainless window of the bungalow we see the professor lying fully dressed on a narrow bed beside a table piled with books. He appears to be sleeping soundly despite the white glare of a naked electric light bulb suspended from the ceiling. Flies buzz on the panes of the closed double windows.

We succeed in waking him, and in his stockinged feet he comes padding out to let us in. We apologise for waking him,

but he says that it is time he wakened. He has hours of work to do. From our rucksacks we produce magazines we have brought from Moscow in which there are pictures of Ernst Toller. We show them to the professor to illustrate our contention that in appearance he is like the great German revolutionary. He regards the pictures with interest, nodding and smiling.

"*Vous-avez raison,*" he declares over and over again.

It is a favourite expression of his. Do we express ourselves amazed at the beauty of this and that, or indignant over the brawl into which every 'bus queue develops with the arrival of a 'bus, "*Vous-avez raison*", says he.

Finally we say that we are very tired and must go to bed.

"*Certainement; vous-avez raison.*"

We certainly have reason to ache all over next morning after the night in that exceedingly hard and narrow bed. We wash again under the kettle, and then in the living-room kindle the Meta-fuel on our tiny stove and perch the little kettle on the top. The professor is much fascinated by the Meta-fuel, saccharine, the dried milk. Whilst we have been getting up he has gone out and purchased a hunk of bread, some butter wrapped in newspaper, and a handful of raisins and sultanas. He clears a space on the book-littered table and produces a thick tumbler; we bring out our enamel mugs and our jack-knife, then sitting on the window-ledge, because there is nowhere else to sit, we breakfast with immense appetite. The sun streams in brightly, and our English tea, even with the dried milk and the saccharine, tastes good. The professor informs us that he is at our service for a few hours this morning, and inquires whether we should like to go with him to the tomb of Tamerlane, whose fluted turquoise dome we have already glimpsed in the distance, across a honeycomb of adobe houses. The prospect delights us, and when we have tidied away the newspaper remains of our breakfast, and rinsed the mugs and tumbler under the jet of water from the kettle, we go out into the brilliant sunlight.

We leave the fine broad boulevard, cross a piece of sun-baked land criss-crossed by little streams, and dive into a narrow alleyway between yellow walls. We follow a narrow broken path on either side an almost dried-up stream picking its way round drifts of stones and through clefts in garbage, and at the end of

the alley suddenly see the glittering pile and the huge pale dome of the Gur-Emir set amidst its acacia trees. We enter through a rickety gate into a neglected garden. Piles of rubbish are stacked against the ancient walls of the mosque; a vine straggles over a dilapidated arbour. The great entrance arch is a superb piece of mosaic work in a fairly good state of repair. The brilliant blue and green tiles are arranged in intricately beautiful floral patterns, and the rectangular columns which flank the square mosaic façade in which the ogival arch is set are gracefully asymmetric, one towering above the top of the wall, the other stopping short a few feet below. The delicate blue of the dome centred above the straight line of the top of the façade, from which the tiles have fallen away, exposing the brown bricks, rises like a huge pale moon in the deeper blue of the sky. Like the first glimpse of the Registan and the clustered cupolas of Shakh-Zinda, it is quite breath-takingly beautiful, and that pale moon rising above the vividly coloured façade emphasises its quality of fairy-tale fantasy.

In the dark entrance to the mausoleum itself an old *Mullah* rises from a rickety-looking camp-bed in an alcove. On a ledge of the wall behind the bed lies a hunk of bread and a yellow melon.

The tomb-stones are railed off by an alabaster balustrade. This dark hall is above the crypt in which the bodies lie. As well as the great Tamerlane himself, various members of his court and some of his descendants, including Ulug-Beg, are buried here. The sarcophagus of Tamerlane is of a very rare stone, of so dark a green as to be almost black; strike a match and examine it closely and it will be found that the edges are translucent. A similar stone figure in the walls, though much of it has been removed by vandals at different periods of history; it is very dark, and translucent at the edges, but grey-green rather than black-green;[1] the *Mullah* told us that it came from India, but that Tamerlane's sarcophagus is of a Chinese stone. Some authorities claim that this 'Chinese stone' is a very dark green jade from China. Others concede that it is jade but that it comes from India. The Indian school claim that China could not have produced so large a block of jade, and that there is no

[1] It is probably a semi-transparent alabaster.

jade anywhere in the vicinity of Samarkand for hundreds of miles, and that therefore it must have come from India. The particulars of the family tree are carved in Arabic script round the base of the sarcophagus, and anyone who wishes may purchase parchment copies of this from the holy man who waits patiently outside. Tall standards and horses' tails such as hung against the dark walls of the mausoleum of Shakh-Zinda here rise above the tombstones in this dark vault, indicating the resting-place of saints.

So Timur, the scourge of God, the master of Asia, rests amongst the saints, in the cool tombs. His body was 'embalmed with musk and rose-water, wrapped in linen, laid in an ebony coffin' and brought to this place finished the year before his death, though some say it was his wish that he should be buried at his birthplace.

We come out into the dazzling brightness of the courtyard. How warm and shining the living world is after the chill gloom of the tombs! On the rush-roofs of the ramshackle arbours which extend along a row of adobe houses opposite pigeons preen themselves in the sun. Cocks crow, a dog barks, a bearded figure in a flowered robe waters a horse at a roadside stream. . . .

"No more tombs and ruins—let us go and find the living Samarkand. . . ."

"I must return to the university now. You should not go out of the town."

"*Vous-avez raison?*"

"*Je suis sérieux.*"

We go, all the same.

XI

GOLDEN SAMARKAND

IN a narrow side-street running out towards the Zarafshan valley and pale distant hills we try to photograph two veiled women, but they move out of our path, deliberately, and hurry away. A small boy carrying a live cock under one arm attempts to reason with them, to persuade them to pose for us; they pause for a moment to regard us from behind the black wall of chedras, but when the boy steps aside for us to photograph them they hurry off again. They are frightened, the boy tells us, laughing, and urges that we make a picture of him. When we have done so he asks us to show it to him. He doesn't understand how it cannot be there, already, in the camera. Several other children join him, all bending eagerly over the camera. We move off followed by a swarm of brown-faced, dark-eyed children wearing velvet skull-caps, the little girls with dresses down to the ground, and their straight black hair in numerous thin plaits.

On either side the road are alleyways flanked by yellow walls of sunbaked bricks and running with water. Adobe houses face on the courtyards behind the walls; there is a cry of cocks, a flutter of pigeons, a straggle of vine. The road runs up to a low cliff of wasteland, and suddenly Samarkand as golden as its name lies at our feet, a honeycomb of adobe houses, flat-roofed, sun-yellow, piled up in tiers, verandah roofs supported by wooden posts, scrawny trees thrusting up at intervals out of the huddle, and all round a parched, grassless wasteland running down to a narrow stream below the rubbish-heap of a cliff.

In the hollows of the uneven ground are scrubby bushes, white with dust. The houses give the impression of being built on top of each other. We climb up over the rubbish-heap to some grey brick ruins, the foundation of some crumbled houses. There is the familiar smell of excrement and dust. Donia leans on a broken parapet and proceeds to make a sketch. I seat myself on a pile of stones and watch two children descending the arid slope opposite carrying a pail between them on a wooden yoke. When they have filled the pail at the stream they struggle back up the hill and pausing to rest become aware of the two figures on the opposite hillside. They leave the pail and run down to the stream again to see us better. They stand and stare for some time, then cross the stream and begin to climb up to us. A few feet away they stand gazing at us. They are both girls, in long dresses, skull-caps, and their hair in numerous tight thin plaits. We smile at them and after a time they approach, cautiously. One works her way round behind the ruins and climbs up on to the parapet, along which she sidles until by leaning forward she can see Donia's sketch. The other child is too little to climb up on to the parapet; she stands behind me, a little way off, rather wistfully. Encouraged by smiles from me and friendly words from Donia she comes forward and finally reaches out a small brown grubby finger and touches the side-fastening of my skirt. It is fastened by press-studs and for her amusement I snap the placket open; she is hugely amused, and comes close to me, fearlessly, and wants to perform the remarkable feat for herself. Not to be outdone, Donia then demonstrates her zip-fastening—but this the little creature finds terrifying and backs away. I bring out the flapjack from the inner breastpocket of my coat and opening it show her the mirror. This fills her with wonder; she smiles shyly at her reflection, and reaches out to touch. When we attempt to photograph the two children they recoil in terror, clinging to each other, and looking fearfully back over their shoulders as they run away. An old man digging a little lower down the slopes calls to them, telling them there is nothing to be afraid of, that a picture will be made of them, and reassured they stand still, but at some distance off, doubtfully.[1]

[1] Frequently in Turkestan we encountered this fear of the camera, in

Returning to the road we traverse a roughly cobbled path flanked by yellow walls and come at last to a village. At cross-roads there are *chai-khanas*, and the usual collection of old men drinking tea. They regard us with a friendly smiling interest. We get into conversation with four elders who are perched up on a carpet-covered platform at the top of a low wall above the pavement. They invite us to come and sit with them. One of them strums a balalaika for our benefit. The sun shines, the acacia trees make trellis patterns on the cobbled roadway. Donkeys with laden panniers clatter over the stones. It serves no social purpose, but how vastly pleasant it is merely to sit in the sun and Be.

With its donkeys, its little shops, its idlers, its feeling of leisure and timelessness, the village is reminiscent of an Irish village, only instead of ' corner-boys ' leaning up against a wall, or on window-sills, or the parapet of a bridge, the idlers sit cross-legged on a carpeted dais beside the road sipping innumerable little bowls of green tea, whilst the shadows lengthen under the twisted acacias. There is all of the Irish feeling of changelessness, of indifference to the thing called Progress, of a fundamental untouchability. O golden, happy Samarkand !

Leaving the village we lose ourselves in a labyrinth of mud-walled alleyways dissecting a honeycomb of adobe houses. It is a complete maze, one turning exactly like another. An occasional veiled woman waddles past, an inhuman white or grey or faded mauve bundle with a hooded head and a black-masked face. There are sounds of voices from the courtyards round which the houses huddle, and at intervals through doors in the walls we get glimpses of that hidden life ; women squat on the cobbles, crouching over pots balanced on fires of sticks ; chicken wander about ; there is the gleam of melons heaped in the shade of verandahs roofed with rush-matting ; there are donkeys, oxen, children, pigeons, dogs. Here and there a sparse tree, willow, acacia, eucalyptus, thrusts up from the mass of flat roofs, and over everything towers the glimmering turquoise dome of Gur-Emir.

adults as well as children. Margaret Craig McKerrow in *The Iron Road to Samarkand* expresses, on the other hand, surprise at the ' alacrity ' with which the Uzbeks present themselves to the camera. I can only say that this was not our experience.

We come out at last into a street wide enough for the passage of an ox-waggon. In the roadside *arik* a man is washing down a horse. A little lower a man crouches drinking, his body stretched out animal-wise over the water. Out on the main road a file of camels swings a leisurely way along through a cloud of dust.

The imposing red brick façade of the university looms up through the thick trees of a boulevard, where stands are being erected for the November 7th celebrations.

XII

FAREWELL TO SAMARKAND

THE owner of the bed we have been sharing is returning. Unless we can find some other accommodation we must leave for Tashkent tonight. Professor X cannot suggest anyone who can take us in, and actually, though Samarkand is a place to linger in indefinitely, we have seen what we came to see and there is no real reason for our postponing our departure any longer. If we can get places on the train we should obviously leave for Tashkent that night. We cannot claim to 'know' Samarkand, but we have looked upon its amazing monuments and explored its ancient streets; we have enjoyed these incomparable privileges, and it were ungrateful now to complain because we have not been further privileged to remain longer in this golden, 'green-curl'd' oasis. We have more than touched the hem of beauty; we have seen her uncovered face. We are enlisted in that small happy band whose imperishable blessing it is that once they were in Samarkand. . . .

We pack our rucksacks and tramp off down the boulevards.

"If you cannot get places on the train be sure to return here, and we will think of something——"

We assure him that we shall be all right, that we shall get places of some kind. It is after all only a night-journey.

We wait a long time for a 'bus, with a straggling queue of other people. Nobody seems to know whether there will be a 'bus, as it is the day of rest.

" You'd think they'd know by now whether the 'buses ran on the day of rest or not, wouldn't you ? "

We walk away, grumbling, through the sunshine. A loud-speaker blares from the roof of a fine-looking modern building. Green and shady and beautiful are the white pavemented boulevards of the new Samarkand. The Russian author of *From Moscow to Samarkand* declares it to be like an old colonial Russian town. Of this I am unable to judge, but it is certainly like a New England modern village, with its broad pavements with double rows of trees, and grassy side-walks, and houses set far back amongst greenery.

We bundle into a droshky, and have not gone far before we are joined by a girl. Outside a shop we observe a young woman wearing a blue silk dress, high-heeled satin shoes, and a luxurious white fur coat. We inquire of the girl who has ' jumped ' our droshky whether it is not unusual to see such a costume in the middle of the afternoon, in a shopping street ? She glances in the direction of our amused gaze and says No, when people have nice clothes they wear them whenever they can, they do not wait to go to the theatre, or a party, or any such festivity. She, also, if she had such clothes would wear them outdoors whenever the weather was fine.

There is again a crowd outside the big food-stores, but this time no mounted militia, only two of the ordinary foot militia guarding the entrance at the top of the steps. Our companion tells us that this stores is newly opened, and that everybody is crowding to it, because it carries more goods than any other stores, and goods which are new to Samarkand. We observe a fine big Torgsin stores nearing completion. Down by the station there is the usual 'bus queue waiting unhopefully. There is a good deal of red bunting about now and the station clock is completely covered with a wooden placard of Stalin's face. A big crowd is gathered round a large grey building near the station. We inquire of our companion as to what it means. She tells us, " They are waiting for places on the Tashkent train tonight. . . ."

Our hearts sink.

" Will they get them do you think ? "

She shrugs. " Perhaps. But many people have been waiting since yesterday."

We deposit our rucksacks in the baggage-room and go along, anxiously, to join the crowd. We have been told at the station that the train leaves at eight o'clock, at nine, at ten; others say not until midnight. 'When it arrives—soon after that it will leave'. It is the most we can hope to elicit.

The crowd outside the booking-hall is even bigger than it had appeared from the 'bus; it fills a small muddy courtyard and swarms up a broad flight of steps to the entrance, where two militia stand on guard. The hall visible beyond the open door at the top of the steps is one solid mass of people. The crowd straggles all round the building. It is a very rough crowd, dirty and unkempt and, from the amount of scratching going on, pretty obviously verminous. We make inquiries as to the end of the 'queue'. It is apparently in a puddle beside a ditch full of water into which I am finally shoved. Along the fence behind the ditch sit the human bundles to be found on all Russian railway stations, squatting there surrounded by their possessions, waiting hour after hour, with a kind of contented hopelessness. For some time we also sit beside the ditch and wait, but we have not the Asiatic temperament for indefinite inactivity; it may serve no good purpose to join the struggling throng on the steps, but at least there is the feeling of doing something. It may even be possible to fight a way inch by inch nearer to the entrance of the hall. It is Baku and the tickets for the steamer all over again, but the crowd is rougher, dirtier, and Asiatic. Every now and then someone charges the door, only to be flung back by the militia; the whole crowd surges back before the impact, and we all find ourselves a step or two lower; when we have regained our balance we press forward again, the impetus this time all from behind. The crowd is remarkably good-tempered. The smell is pretty bad.

The afternoon sunlight fades, and it is evening. No one appears to be admitted to the hall.

"They haven't started giving the tickets out yet."

"When will they?"

"Who knows?"

We give up the struggle and go away to the station buffet and drink glasses of tea, debating with each other as to whether, now that we have seen Samarkand, we shall take a chance and

go to the station-master and explain that we are foreigners and ask for the privilege of soft places and no queueing. . . .

"It's horribly anti-social——"

"I'm demoralised. Each for himself in a scrum like this——"

"He's bound to ask for our papers, and it would be a pity to be sent back to Moscow in disgrace——"

"It's where we want to go, anyhow; it would only mean cutting out Tashkent——"

"I'd sooner get back to Moscow without being arrested, all the same——"

So we return to the queue, to find that it has so far progressed that it is now all contained within the hall. The heat and smell inside are fantastic. There is no room to sit, even on the floor. After a time I begin to feel faint, and the moment a man leaves a bench beside the wall I drop down into it. He returns in a few minutes and asks for his place.

"Tell the hulking great brute to go to hell," I say, crossly. "Tell him I'm sick, dying, anything you like, but he can't have his seat."

Donia translates an expurgated edition of this, but he insists on having his seat. We discover that by persuading somebody farther along the bench to remove a bag of fish everyone can move up a little and we can both sit down.

Wandering away to discover whether there is anyone who can be of assistance, Donia encounters one of the men who had been in the hotel the night of our arrival in Samarkand. After a few minutes she returns with him to where I sit, glowering at my unpleasantly smelling and ungallant companion, who, unabashed by my glares of hate, is full of friendly smiles.

Donia explains excitedly, "The *tovarich* here says that it's absurd for us to be hanging about like this—that we should go to the station-master."

"But our papers—no permit, and an expired visa——"

"I've told him our papers are not in order, but he says we won't be asked to show them. It's worth chancing, I think——"

Between feeling sick and bad-tempered and half-suffocated by the heat, the airlessness, and the smell, I decide that almost anything is worth chancing.

We struggle through the dense mob and out into the good air.

We have some difficulty in finding the station-master.

The half-wit mute makes horrible noises and points to a door. We push it open and come into a dark narrow corridor. We knock on the door immediately opposite. Getting no reply we open it and discover a severe-looking uniformed official sitting at a green baize-covered table talking to another official. They glance up at us without interrupting their conversation. We wait patiently, and when the conversation flows on and on without any sign of a break, precisely as though we did not stand there, Donia clears her throat and says firmly, "*Tovarich*——"

At that moment the room is plunged into black darkness. The whole station is in darkness. The lights have fused.

We grope our way out into the corridor and stand there till the lights come on again. Another official enters the corridor and Donia asks him if the station-master is in the room opposite. He says No, and directs us elsewhere. We come to a pleasantly furnished little office, but there is no one there. We sit and wait, and after a few minutes an official enters. Nervously Donia makes her speech about our being foreigners and not understanding the methods of acquiring tickets; we want soft places for Tashkent tonight, and if he can help us . . .

He smiles. But yes, yes, certainly. If we will go over to the booking-hall he will come over and arrange it for us. In a few moments.

Dazed, we thank him and still unable to believe our good fortune leave the station and retrace our steps to the packed ticket-office. We wait about at the top of the steps for him, and after an anxious half-hour his uniformed figure is to be seen crossing the big square in front of the station and coming in this direction. . . .

Arriving, he bids us follow him, and shoulders his way ruthlessly through the closely packed mob, we following. It should be recorded to our credit that we felt badly about this anti-social conduct. From the socialist standpoint it was as wrong as anything could be. We felt the injustice of it, the selfishness of it; we were deeply ashamed, but such is human nature that our sense of the unfairness and our sense of guilt did not prevent us from taking advantage of this unfairness.

A high wooden barrier like a ten-barred gate divides the mob

from the booking-office windows. The crowd presses close against it, anxious faces peering through. There are women with babies at their breasts jammed in the mass. One woman has long black plaits which several times get caught and pulled in the struggle. She is very lovely, in a gypsyish fashion, with long brass ear-rings, a coloured silk handkerchief on her head, and a full dark red skirt. She wears numerous bracelets and a brightly coloured shawl. She asks questions of several people, but no one seems to understand her tongue, and she does not speak Russian. The child at her bare brown breast is very young, and she herself cannot be more than seventeen or eighteen. She has the wild proud beauty of some of the Caucasian women of the steppes, and she seems completely bewildered by the shoving, struggling mob. There is in this crowd no vestige of consideration shown for women with children in their arms and at their breasts. Now the bewildered face of this girl-mother is pressed up against the barrier. There is a kind of dumb animal pleading in her dark eyes which I find intolerable. Why should we two foreigners be privileged like this, whilst women with babies must stand waiting jostled and trampled by the crowd? Our sense of shame deepens. We cannot look at the women with babies, or at the patient old men and women with their tired, resigned eyes. It is almost a relief that some Red Army officers are being similarly privileged. . . .

We are given our tickets; we escape out into the good air again, away from the smell and the heat and the sight of those angry or pitiful faces. Whilst we are still standing in the porch, putting away our money and the tickets, the girl with the plaits and the baby suddenly brushes past us; she is smiling now, wonderful teeth flashing in her brown face; behind her strides a tall big man, handsome as herself, towering over her protectively. She, at least, is now off our conscience.

We retrieve our rucksacks and adjourn to the station, to the room in which we passed the night. It is as packed as ever. The benches are full. We put our rucksacks against a wall and sit on them and wait. A great many other people are doing the same thing.

How we know when the train arrives, and that it is our train, I have no idea. But there comes a point when there is a general

exodus of robes and beards and *paranjas* and kettles and bedding, fur hats and turbans and sheepskins, and in this exodus we instinctively join.

We come out on to the platform and cross the lines to the waiting train. We clamber up the steps, and confidently present our tickets to the sullen-looking bundled-up woman guard. She waves us, surlily, into a hot yellow wooden cattle-truck of a compartment with the usual three tiers of wooden shelves.

"But we have soft places——"

"You have not tickets for soft places."

"But the station-master himself got them for us. We are foreigners. We asked for soft places——"

We are completely bewildered.

Not merely have we got hard places, but top shelves, high up near the grimy ceiling, and we are in different sections of the train!

We sit down on the nearest seat and gloomily watch a cockroach wandering over the yellow partition opposite.

"I'll go and see what can be done——"

But there is nothing to be done. All the soft places are full of Red Army officers and 'delegates', it appears. We must make the best of our wooden shelves for the night.

Shall we ever get a decent night's rest again, we wonder, wearily—two nights on the deck of a ship, the Krasnovodsk dawn, two nights on a train to Samarkand, the night on the railway station, then the hard narrow bed at the university, and now a plank in this stinking compartment. . . . Ah well!

We part company and I clamber up to my shelf, stuff a woollen jumper under my long-suffering hip-bone, pull my old leather coat over my face, and pray that if I cannot get to sleep at least I won't fall off when the train gets going. . . . The unwell feeling which had come upon me in the booking-hall bears down on me again. One ought to feel well for journeys like this. Well, one doesn't, and that's all there is to it. I try to sleep.

Suddenly the door of the compartment bursts open and in bound some half-dozen laughing and shouting young men. I dive deeper under my coat, and have barely done so when it is snatched from my face. There is a loud laugh. I am resolved to ignore the horse-play and cover myself up again. A few

moments later it happens again, and I am in a blazing rage. I sit up on my shelf close to the ceiling and glare.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" I demand. They may not understand English but they can scarcely fail to understand the tone of voice. There is an Esperanto of rage as well as of love.

One of them, an insolent-looking, unshaven youth, comes over to my side of the compartment and looks up at me, smiling. I do not understand Russian, but I understand very well what he says, his mock innocence, and the titters of his companions.

I consign him to the devil and retire under my coat again. The men are the dining-car staff, and they are much amused by the intrusion of a passenger, and a female one at that, into their section of the compartment. They begin taking off their boots. There is immediately a disgusting smell of unwashed feet. The loud laughter and the horseplay continues for some time. One takes off his belt and chastises one of the others. Every time he raises his arm and lets fly, the belt falls back on to me. At first I think it is just carelessness; when it begins to dawn on me that it is deliberate I spring up and leaning down snatch the belt out of the youth's hands and stuff it under my pillow. There is a roar of laughter. If only I could speak the language! But any more baiting and this time it will be I who lets that belt fly. . . .

The horseplay dies down. The men stretch out on the planks. Some of them unroll grimy blankets. Others roll up their jackets for head-rests and dispense with any covering.

There are snatches of sleep. I am wakened by the clatter of my companions leaving the compartment before it is daylight. I climb down from the shelf, my body aching all over, and sit down on the seat beside the opposite window. I rub a patch of window clear of steam and look out on to grey desert and a flaming sky.

I tidy myself as best I can and then wander away through the hot stinking compartments, packed with humanity, in search of Donia.

Everyone is awake. People are eating. You can always see people eating in the hard compartments of a Russian train. The heat and stench are incredible.

I find a bleary-eyed Donia combing her hair.

" My compartment is empty, and it smells less than here——"

" Did you sleep ? "

I tell her about the hooligans of the night.

" We'll make a row about it."

" Ah ! What the hell——"

When we get back to my section of the coach we find the owner of the belt there.

" He says you've got his belt."

" You might tell him some of the things I'd have said to him myself last night if I spoke Russian."

Donia tells him and with an eloquence and rhetoric which commands all my admiration and envy. I find it hard to believe she is not telling the young man that she intends wiring Stalin the moment we get to Tashkent. . . .

" I don't know what you said," I tell her afterwards, " but whatever it was it was prettily spoken—thanks very much."

" I think I said everything you'd have said yourself had you been able."

" That his conduct was lousy and unethical ? "

" Roughly."

We settle down to make tea and watch the new day breaking in flame and gold over the endless grey desert.

XIII

TASHKENT: NOVEMBER SEVENTH

THE station is gay with red banners and bunting and a brass band. Although it is so early, not yet nine o'clock, the November seventh celebrations have begun. Outside the station people are marching, bands playing, crowds already gathered.

There is no sign of Varya, to whom we had sent a telegram from Samarkand. We reflect that it is possible that she could not get through the streets with the celebrations in progress.

"If she doesn't turn up we can get a droshky and go to her place——"

"Or leave Tashkent tonight, if we can get places."

We are both of us shocked and excited by the boldness of this suggestion. It is a relief that Varya is not there. We are both far too exhausted for her wild embraces . . . and the prospect of a bed—a bed that will not make us ache all over by morning—on the Moscow train, on which, we have heard, the sleepers are all 'international', that is to say de luxe, is almost irresistibly alluring—and wildly exciting.

"Can we see all we want to see of Tashkent in one day?"

"It's not ancient and interesting like Samarkand, so I don't see why not."

"Poor Varya if we don't turn up. She'll be so disappointed, poor child."

"We'll send her a little present from Moscow——"

This idea of leaving Tashkent that night seizes hold of us

like a fever. We go into the buffet and drink glasses of tea and bread and cheese, and decide that we will make a final search for Varya, and if we fail to find her—which we hope—we will tackle the problem of getting places on the train for Moscow that night. We are resolved to take a chance and go to the station-master. After all at Samarkand our papers had not been asked for. . . .

Looking back I am convinced that we made a mistake at this point, that we should have gone to Varya's apartment house and stayed a few days. Not with the idea of seeing more of Tashkent than we did, but for the experience of living in a Russian ménage. At the time the idea of Varya's exuberance, and of one more night of discomfort when there was a chance of comfort, was too much for us. Had we been able to travel in comfort to Tashkent we should perhaps have felt more equal to Varya and the prospect of further discomfort, dirt, and squalor. As it was we were mentally and physically exhausted, and it was becoming increasingly obvious that the sickness I had been fighting ever since that day amongst the mountains of the Caucasus was laying hold of me beyond any will-power of mine to ward off. . . .

When we had breakfasted we searched for a place in which to wash. A woman ticket-collector told us gloomily that there was none. She was a Russian. "But here they are so uncivilised that there is no place where you can wash after your journey."

We found a latrine, some distance beyond the station building, on a siding, but all that could be said for it was that it was private. It was a hole in the ground, and it is necessary to wade through unspeakable filth to get near it. The flies were terrible. The walls of the station buildings were covered with them. The early morning coolness yielded quickly to hot sunshine in which the flies swarmed and buzzed with immense and horrifying gusto. It was like Krasnovodsk.

We got rid of our rucksacks and heavy coats in a sort of cellar, the entrance to which was black with flies, and outside of which numerous people sat about on their bundles. There was a huge crowd outside the booking-hall. We forced a way through and marched up the steps, our manner so determined that the crowd made way for us, and the militia guarding the doors, hearing that we had business with the station-master, let us through without question. So far the bluff was working beautifully, we congratu-

lated ourselves. Our story for the station-master was that it was terribly important we should get back to Moscow without delay. If he asked to see our papers and spotted our expired visas we simply said, Quite so; that was the reason it was so important we should get back to Moscow at once, our visas were already expired. . . .

The station-master invited us into his office. He was very affable. He accepted without question that we were foreigners, did not inquire what nationality, or ask to see our papers. The train was full, he said, and there was no international coach on the Moscow train the following night. But . . . he had had a telegram from two foreigners to save them soft places; if they did not claim them by two o'clock that afternoon we should have them. More than that he could not promise us. And more than that we could not then do for ourselves.

"Shall we try for hard places if we don't get these places?"

"For five nights and five and a half days? It would kill us in our present state!"

"There's always the chance of getting soft places once you're aboard!"

"I'm not taking any chances. I'd sooner go to Varya's."

"Even if it means sleeping with her?"

"Hell! Sufficient unto the day is the horror thereof, surely to God? Let's not think further ahead than two o'clock! If those blasted other foreigners turn up we'll think again then."

"Let's go and try to find some public baths. I itch all over."

In the square outside the station we inquire of a droshky driver if he knows where there are any public baths. He doesn't know, and his manner suggests that he doesn't care. We ask a woman sitting on a bench. She says, Yes, there are public baths, but they will be closed today, as it is a holiday. A droshky driver confirms this. We then ask if the 'buses are running. He tells us not till after eleven o'clock; the streets are closed till the processions are over.

"How much to the old town?"

"Ninety roubles."

"It is too much. Much too much."

The droshky driver then goes into a sulky huddle and refuses to be tempted out of it with suggestions of thirty or perhaps fifty roubles. . . .

We try the next driver on the rank. He agrees to take us for thirty roubles, always provided we can get through, which he isn't certain of.

We bundle in, and the buggy-looking conveyance clatters away over the cobbles, and out on to a long straight road lined by tall slender trees like overgrown silver birches. It is like the approach to new Samarkand. Modern Tashkent is altogether like modern Samarkand, with its fine broad boulevards with several rows of trees, its houses almost hidden in trees, its imposing stone buildings, its road-side *ariks*, its poplars, its willows, its Torgsin stores, its park, its Karl Marx Avenue, its Lenin Street, its institutes, co-operative stores. There is the same leafiness. But it is bigger, more commercial. Samarkand has no trams. And here we meet the barrack-like blocks of workers' apartments again, white or pink-washed, but with window-boxes, and built round courtyards with flower-beds, or the promise of flower-beds. I keep thinking of Alexander Neverov's novel *Tashkent*,[1] a story of the 1921 famine, when Tashkent, the 'Stone City', was the city of plenty, and peasants flocked in from the surrounding countryside, travelling vast distances across the steppes in cattle-trucks and clinging to the buffers of trains, dying beside the track, and on Tashkent railway station. . . .

Tashkent dates back to the seventh century; it has been in the hands of the Turks and of the Chinese, and was taken by the Russians in that historic year of Russian Imperialism, 1865. The population today is as varied as in Samarkand, but consists mainly of Uzbeks, Sarts, and Russians. Workers' Soviets were established in Tashkent before the revolution had reached the rest of Russia, and were crushed by Kerensky. Not till 1919 did Tashkent know any peace; she had to contend with the Emir of Bokhara, British troops, and a perpetual guerilla warfare with the straggling remnants of the Whites. By 1920 the Soviets had triumphed, the Emir of Bohkara fled, and his lands, and those of the Khan of Khiva, were added to the Turkestan republics. In 1924 all Turkestan was reorganised,

[1] Gollancz (1930).

and the republics which now constitute it were formed under the Soviet regime, with Samarkand as their joint centre.

Today Tashkent is like Samarkand, with its modern, Russianised new town, and its old town where the century-old Asiatic civilisation still flows on its leisurely tea-drinking way.

Trying to get across the new town to the old on that November seventh is no easy matter. Processions of men, women, and children, fill every street, carrying banners, model aeroplanes, riding in lorries disguised as railway engines and tractors—it is all rather like the Nice carnival, but without the confetti and the pellets of chalk which make such a disgusting mess of one's clothes during that festivity. There are processions of children, the girls in white dresses, the boys wearing white shirts and shorts, round their necks the red handkerchief of the Pioneer; there are processions of emancipated Uzbek women wearing European clothes and brightly coloured plush and velvet and embroidered skull-caps. There are men and women marching in procession together, bearing banners with the proud device, 'In Honour of the coming Revolution of the Whole World', 'Salute to Stalin', 'In Honour of 18 years of Revolution', 'Workers of the World Unite'. Red banners draped across the façades of houses, offices, institutes, stores, and across the street are similarly inscribed. There are military processions, brass bands, processions of this and that institute and club, and red flags and huge red stars and streamers everywhere, but, and this is interesting, there is none of the shoddiness and vulgarity which characterised the street-decorations of the Jubilee in London. There are too many placards of Stalin, it is true, but behind the street decorations there is a definite artistic impulse and the result is what such decorations should be and so seldom are—decorative.

Mounted militia keep the streets in which the processions march free of traffic. Where traffic is permitted soft drinks and food are being sold from motor-lorries. There is music everywhere, and the red flags and white dresses have a quality of brilliance in the bright sunlight. At street-corners there are booths for the sale of sweets, cakes, fruit, drinks.

The costumes become more varied as we approach the old town along a hideously ugly main road of tram lines and grey

brick walls, there are the flowered dressing-gown-like robes and padded coats again, and the grey and mauve and grubby white bundles of women shuffling along in their *paranjas*, the stiff black curtain of the *chedras* before their faces; there are flat Mongolian faces, brown faces with high cheekbones, insolent-eyed gipsy faces, faces which are almost purely Chinese, handsome fine-featured Persian faces with black moustaches and beards, wild faces under sheepskin hats, arrogant ones under turbans and, usually, young and impudent-looking ones under round, light-coloured fur hats. Here are Tadjiks, Uzbeks, Khirghiz, Sarts, Iranians, Turcomen, Jews, in a Turkestan medley.

But there are fewer turbans than in Samarkand; here in Tashkent the skull-cap is triumphant, and the costumes are less gay. In the clothes of the children, especially, may be seen the assertion of Europe over Asia; skull-caps are worn, but the hair of the little girls is often done into as few as two plaits, their dresses are, for the most part, short, and woollen jumpers tend to replace the decorative tight-fitting and brightly coloured velvet jackets of the little girls of Samarkand. There is, generally, a tendency towards submerging Oriental decorativeness in European drabness.

On the outskirts of the old town we leave the ugly main road and turn into a narrow cobbled street flanked by crowded tea-houses and little shops such as characterise the streets of Samarkand, displaying earthenware pans of cream, earthenware jugs of sour milk; there are barbers, tobacconists, blacksmiths, tinkers, leather-workers, copper-workers, and soft drink booths. Over some of the shops there are sun-awnings of faded red and white striped canvas, and of thin rush-matting. There is a traffic of donkeys and mules, and the rattle of bullock-waggons and the high-wheeled *arbas* over the cobbles. There are weeping willows over a road-side pond, a running of water in the gutters, the pale gleam of the cupola of a mosque above a yellow mud wall. There are glimpses of courtyards in which fig trees reach up to the tops of the walls, and vines straggle over untidy arbours. Narrow cobbled alleyways climb up out of the main road on either side. The main road widens out and there are *chai-khanas* so large that they are almost café-terraces; they are

packed with men, mostly old men. Not a woman is to be seen. We continue on past this place of tea-houses and come to a large sandy open space in which a market is being held. This market-square is on uneven ground like the market under the walls of Bibi-Khanum, and a honeycomb of adobe houses rising in tiers on a low escarpment on three sides of it. It is very like the Samarkand market; there are the bundles of hay and grass, the piles of melons, the heaps of old shoes, all laid out on the ground, and on the trestle-tables glasses of sour milk, bunches of grapes, heaps of figs, piles of carrots. There are camels, mules, donkeys, oxen, waggons, and *arbas*. . . .

The droshky jolts on over the rough ground and we come out to another and smaller piece of sandy waste ground where a crowd is gathered. There is a sound of music, a rhythmic beating of drums and a metallic clangour. The driver flourishes his whip towards the crowd.

"Dancing," he remarks laconically.

We have him stop and leaving the droshky make our way over to the crowd. It is too dense for us and we can see nothing. We move round to the back where there is a hillock. We clamber up, attracting some attention as we do so, and immediately we are seized by two smiling Uzbek youths and assisted on to a wooden platform in front of the hillock.

The Uzbeks speak Russian. "Now you can see."

"What is it all about?"

"Uzbek dances. We have them always at holiday times."

The circular space below us is laid out as a small garden, with little lawns and paths. An Uzbek wearing a skull-cap, high boots, and a striped robe, with a triangular handkerchief tied round his waist, is shuffling along the paths and round the lawns in rhythm with the music which consists of cymbals and two curious-looking oblong drums.

The dancer has his arms extended and every now and then gives a shake of the hips and a flirt of the shoulders, a feminine and suggestively sexual gesture which amuses the crowd as infallibly as a deliberately 'Nancy' gesture on the stage delights an English audience. At the end of the dance—which is when the dancer feels he has done enough—the robe and handkerchief are taken from him by a youth standing by the musicians, and

Voks

COTTON-GATHERERS IN TURKMENISTAN

Planet News

THE MARKET, TASHKENT

The woman on the left holds the ends of her head-dress between her teeth, 'veiling' the lower part of the face. The tight thin plaits of the girl is a typical form of hair-dressing for young girls throughout Turkestan. Note the Mongol features of the young girl. *Right:* A close-up of the quilted coats.

another dancer is recruited from the crowd. Some of the dancers put more vigour into the movements than others, bounding into the ring with a flying leap and plunging into fierce stamping movements up and down the paths, whereupon the musicians 'beat it up' accordingly, but the sensual wriggle is, apparently, an essential feature, and a movement for which the audience waits expectantly. The Uzbeks are said to be casually bi-sexual and to have a poor opinion of woman even when she works by their side in the sex equality of the Soviet regime, and it is interesting to conjecture how much of their taste for homo-sexuality is reflected in the effeminacy and sexual suggestiveness of their dances in which, significantly, the women take no part. The Tadjiks have similarly aphrodisiac dances performed by male dancers only.

We found the performance monotonous and left after the third exhibition, for the only variety is in the personality of the dancer, and in whether he chooses to perform the movements with a slow or a vigorous sensuality.

We leave the old town by a triumphal entry arch draped in red, and surmounted by a vast picture of Stalin and a red star.

We are back on the railway station a few minutes before two o'clock. The processions have all dissolved; the trams are running—and what trams! Surely the shabbiest and most overcrowded trams in the whole of the U.S.S.R., which, when one remembers Leningrad and Moscow and Kiev, but particularly Leningrad, is saying a very great deal. . . .

We present ourselves to the station-master. Almost we dare not ask him, "Have the other foreigners claimed their tickets?"

Miraculously he answers: "No, they have sent a telegram that the train which is bringing them to Tashkent is four hours late, so they cannot be here in time. The Moscow train leaves at 4.26. You may have the places."

Sometimes, I mutter, as we count out the roubles, sometimes God looks after his little ones. . . .

We go into the hot, crowded buffet, full of the shriek of a loud-speaker, and eat a greasy meal with relish and drink a bottle of vinegary beer. We are feeling very gay, all our pangs of conscience about Varya vanished. We are going to Moscow,

travelling international, de luxe. For five days we shall have nothing to do but rest and sleep. O blessed, blessed. . . . No more horrors of ships' decks, of nights on railway stations, of being cramped *à deux* into one hard narrow bed that leaves one aching all over, no more lying on shelves without bedding in stinking cattle-trucks of 'hard' compartments. We could hug each other, laugh at nothing, sing out loud, and cry a little from sheer exhaustion. We redeem our rucksacks from the cellar round which the flies, in the heat of early afternoon, swarm if possible more thickly than ever; the train has arrived already, the beautiful, precious train that will take us back to Moscow in five or six days of blessed, blessed sleep and rest, and we are impatient to be aboard. Quite without any twinges of social conscience we march through the crowds who have been waiting all day for tickets and jauntily we approach the entrance to the platform, presenting our precious tickets. We pass beyond the barrier and on to the platform, and there a few yards away, across the lines, waits the train. As we move towards it with all the eagerness of love and longing, the ticket inspector at the barrier suddenly demands:

"Have you your documents?"

We swing round, our hearts beating wildly. To have trouble over our papers now, just when we are leaving Turkestan. . . . Oh, no, God, don't be mean; not now, not after all the worry, and braving the station-master, and getting away with everything up till now, even the inspector on the Samarkand train who said our visas were expired and warned us to prepare to meet our consul, having got away with even that, we can't be arrested now. . . .

"Oh, yes, rather, our documents are fine, thanks very much." No, you can't say that. Answer him soberly, but confidently, Yes, we have documents.

"Show me, please."

"Certainly, *Tovarich*."

What a lark, *Tovarich*, they're only good old British passports, jolly rare in Turkestan, what, and with consulate visas weeks expired. . . . We stand silently, with bright *we've*-got-nothing-to-worry-about faces, whilst the comrade at the portals of freedom stares, puzzled, at the British lion. . . .

Please, God, make it all mean not a thing to him.

The comrade at the gate looks at us over his pince-nez.

"So you're British, eh?" in a threatening voice. We are all set for him to say that, for him to beckon to the militia-man standing a few feet away, for the precious train to steam out without us. . . .

But what he says is simply: "Moscow?"

Whether he means have we come from it or are we going to it we neither know nor care. We smile and nod, brightly, feverishly.

He smiles and hands back our 'documents' and waves us to the train, and freedom.

They may ask to see our papers on the train, and disapprove of them, but they can hardly do anything about it; they can scarcely command us to return at once to Moscow when we are already aboard the train and doing it as fast as we can. . . .

XIV

THE FIVE-DAY TRAIN

IT is positively like being aboard the Blue Train. The lower berth of the *coupé* converts by day to a wide, comfortable couch; the upper berth folds back against the wall above the window; there is a table, a comfortable seat opposite, a private lavatory. The guard wears a smart brown uniform and bestows a Blue-train and quite un-Sovietesque attentiveness on passengers. He is clearly one of the old regime, for whom the class distinctions must, in the nature of things, exist. We are no longer *Tovarich*, but *Madame*.

We are the only foreigners. There is a Red Army officer, and a number of people whom in any other country one would without hesitation describe as of the *bourgeoisie*.

At 4.26 to the minute, we start out on the journey of more than 2000 miles to Moscow, and are immediately in the vast wilderness of the Syr Daria, which rises somewhere in the Tien Shan and flows across the salt wastelands left by the slowly drying up Aral Sea, in which it finally loses itself. In the distance, a range of blue and snowy mountains; when they are no longer visible behind us we are engulfed in the endlessness of a sandy wasteland that is neither desert nor steppe, but a desolation of pinkish rocks and stones. Near the track there are occasional huddles of mud-houses. There is a lonely adobe farmhouse built round a yard in which there is a gleam of fires lighted on the ground. There are small haycocks, though it is fantastic to think of this wilderness yielding enough grass to

feed a single cow. There are camels, oxen, chickens. The light fades. It is bitterly cold.

We have an immense sleep and wake next day to a sandy wilderness whose flatness is relieved by drifts of pampas grass. Occasional herds of cattle graze on God knows what, and camels nibble at scrubby bushes. There are yellow settlements of adobe houses, and then, for the first time since we left Krasnovodsk, the round felt *yurts* of the Kazaks. In the distance there are the shafts of oil wells thrusting up like a pine forest. We are in Kazakstan, the largest of the five republics of modern Turkestan, and the largest in area of the autonomous republics in the U.S.S.R., and the least populated, being inhabited chiefly by wandering tribes. It suffers from sandstorms in summer and snowstorms in winter; in summer it is swept by hot dry winds, and in winter by biting winds. The winter climate is said to be colder than that of Finland, which I can well believe, for I have never known a more savage cold.

Here and there the grass is being burnt. We ask the guard about it and he tells us that it is being done so that rice might be planted. The country becomes less of a steppe and more of a desert as the day wears on.

The small stations at which we halt swarm with Asiatic crowds. There are still a number of Uzbeks, and a great many Kazaks and the usual chattering crowd of women offering cooked chickens, sour milk, pickled cucumbers, rushing up and down the track, beside the train, or offering their wares over a wooden paling at the back of the platform. At every station there is a wild rush from the train, men, women, and children clutching tea-kettles of all shapes and sizes and stampeding over the lines and platforms to the hot-water taps. Behind one station some children are skating on a frozen pond overhung by naked weeping willows. Everyone is clothed from head to foot in sheepskin and felt.

We climb down from the train at these halts and tramp up and down the platforms trying to resist the intense cold in the interest of exercise. The hard compartments of the train are packed. There is the usual heat and smell, the usual litter of melon and sunflower seeds, the sour smell of black bread, the acrid smell of fish, and pervading even the sour-sweet smell of

humanity a smell of latrines that seizes you by the throat and which no amount of spitting will eradicate. People sleep on the tiers of wooden shelves, their feet stuck out into the gangway. A lurch of the train as you pass along and there would be a toe in your eye. . . . The lighting in these hard compartments is so bad that when daylight fails there is nothing to do but sleep; it is too dark to read or play cards.

We waken on the third day to bright sunlight, but the intense cold is unabated. We are still in the wilderness. Sandy plains of coarse grass flow flatly away to meet the sky in all directions. Beside the lines, on either side, there are snow-fences composed of hurdles, one upright one with a sloping one behind. There are occasional frozen ponds. The sandy steppes become sand-dunes blowing with pampas grass and grey, scrubby, leafless bushes—off which a camel, no doubt, could make a satisfactory meal. The train crawls, and the day is interminable. There is nothing to do but eat and sleep. Whenever the scenery changes slightly I make notes, but for hours it remains the same, nothing but sandy steppe covered with coarse grass, nothing but sand-dunes, with the occasional relief of a low-built farm built compound-wise and surrounded by small stacks of hay and grass, its greyness lit by a red flag. That inescapable red flag, which follows one into wilderness, steppe, desert, so searchingly thorough is the Stalinist propaganda department. Not a collection of mud-huts but raises the scarlet banner high; beneath its shade they do most literally live and die; Moscow sees to that.

On the stations bowls of hot soup are displayed on trestle tables behind which the peasant women stand. There are also cans of what appear to be hot mashed potatoes, and earthenware jugs of hot milk. There are Kazak women with white scarves wound round and trailing from high head-dresses, some with the ends of the scarf drawn up over the lower part of their faces, and wearing men's trousers and three-quarter-length corduroy coats, stocky, thick-set women with flat Mongolian faces.

Towards afternoon we come to low hills covered with brown grass on which graze herds of cattle and goats. There are numerous snow-fences, some of them about twelve feet high.

There are frozen streams, and white cabins against which hay- and grass-stacks have been erected, so that the houses have the appearance of having been built into the stacks. There are also flat-roofed adobe houses built into the earth so that they look like large ant-hills in which windows have been set.

A full white moon rises in the late afternoon. The sky is still blue, with rows of windy clouds. The train crawls. . . . We must surely be a week reaching Moscow at this rate. Later, we learn that at no stage of its journey does the train ever do more than thirty miles an hour. . . .

Dark, low, blue hills in the distance, and a brilliant sunset. In the west the sky is a deep golden amber, smeared with petunia colours, wine-red, purple-red. The east is a sheet of steel, grey-blue, the colour of the bitter cold.

In the dining-car the vodka has given out. Likewise the cigarettes. The train goes trundle, trundle, trundle across the great plains of the Urals. On such a journey it is criminal negligence to allow the vodka to give out. . . .

In the morning I call down from my upper berth: "What's the scenery?"

A morose voice answers from below: "Nothing. Just steppes."

I am tired of looking at grey plains hour after hour. The more so now that the camels as well as the vodka have given out. But I remember that we are due to reach Orenburg at about ten, and, gradually, get up. There is bright sunlight. It is much less cold. We are out of the deserts now, out of Asia, and nearly three-quarters of the way to Moscow.

Before Orenburg the steppes assume a down-like swell which breaks their monotony. There are cattle grazing. We pass a *kolkhoz*, frozen streams and rivers with ice-floes, and high snow-fences. The shadows of clouds move over the gently undulating land. Hot soup and hot milk still on sale at the stations, but the clothes of the people are losing their Asiatic decorativeness; we have left the greyness of the deserts and are coming to the greyness of Russia. Orenburg is the first big town we have seen for days. It is the 'frontier' between East and West. It originated in 1735 with a fort, one of many erected by the Russians as defences against Bashkir and Kirghiz

tribes. It was filled with refugees after the 1917 revolution and suffered heavily during the 1920–1921 famine. It has a mixed population of Russians, Tartars, Kirghiz, Bashkirs, and others. It is a market for the products of the Central Asian republics, exchanging silk, cotton, carpets, sheep, cattle, horses, dried fruits, wool, for its own textile and metal goods.

When we leave Orenburg excitement is finished for the day. The train crawls along towards Samarra, on whose station during the great famine the corpses were stacked like firewood and thousands encamped waiting for trains that when at last they did arrive, days late, would be already packed with peasants fleeing from the famine areas.

The steppes are greener now, and there are a few stark, wintry trees, and patches of cultivated land. The landscape is broken with cloud-shadows, and the soft blue folds of hills in the near distance. It wants only now that someone should sing the Volga boat-song, though it has been said that Russia is the only country in which it is never heard . . . which is not true.

By the afternoon we come to a dilapidated village of wooden houses with thatched roofs. Some of the roofs have caved in and the houses stand like gaunt skeletons. There are low hills, and cattle grazing, and the first really green grass we have seen for days.

The food on the train is rapidly giving out. We take to eating *semochki*, a disgusting-looking greasy mess of maize, after which we both feel sick.

In the night the feeling of something wrong inside which had begun amongst the Caucasian mountains and hammered repeatedly on a resisting consciousness during various phases of the journey now asserts itself with a vehemence which will not be denied. I am seized with violent pains, and it is no longer possible to pretend that I am not stricken with one of the more painful varieties of dysentery.

On the fifth day I lie on the lower berth clasping to my stomach a wine-bottle which the guard has obligingly secured from the kitchen and filled with hot water and wrapped in a grubby cloth. Every now and then he looks in, rubs his own stomach up and down, and says: "Bel-lee?" in tones of sympathetic inquiry.

I make faces of excruciating pain back at him, and he nods comprehendingly, sighs, and looks anxious. It is his opinion, I learn later, that I am ill as a result of eating in the train buffet. He suggests that at the next stop we buy ourselves a cooked chicken and some sour cucumbers, which will be far better for us than the greasy messes prepared in the train kitchen. Indeed, he cannot think why we haven't done this all along. We plead that we had believed that the train meals might consist of cleaner and better food, and that it is only during the last few days, when the supplies began to give out, that they have been so bad; but now we will certainly take his advice. . . . Leave it to him, he says, he will buy us a good chicken, uncooked; it shall be cooked on the train and served to us in our compartment; he himself will see to it. . . .

(He saw to it, and excellent it was, served up in style, garnished with bits of greenery, and surrounded by greasy potatoes. We shared it with him and his assistant, and washed it down with the vinegary beer which was the only alternative to a sickly fruit drink.)

It is a day of bright sunlight, and not very cold, though we pass frozen rivers. The country is wooded now, with birches and firs. There are wooden villages, the houses like Swiss chalets but without the Swiss trimness, and lumber-camps, the logs frozen into the rivers. This district supplies the whole of Central Asia with timber, the Volga being the trade-link between the north and the Caspian Sea. All the morning we pass forests and lumber-camps. At the halts women come alongside the train offering wild apples, dried and green, hot and cold milk, and cooked chickens, which are much in demand. In the afternoon we pass ploughed land, and numerous, straggling, rickety-looking wooden villages. There is an occasional windmill. The snow-fences are fewer, and now, if any proof were wanted that we are finished with Islam, green onion-shaped domes and towers rise once more above the trees, and there is a glitter of golden crosses in the wintry sunlight.

The crowds on the station are all drab now. There are straw shoes tied with string, felt boots, canvas leggings.

We are twelve hours late, and the train still crawling. Tomorrow we shall arrive in Moscow, but already the adventure

is over ; it is all there, confined in two sketch-books, a note-book, and in the coloured pages of memory.

We amuse ourselves working out how many kilometres we have covered, and translating it into miles, and find that by the time we get back to Moscow we shall have covered seven thousand miles.

XV

'QUOTH THE RAVEN . . .'

THE sixth day is cold and grey. We arrive at Moscow station at about nine, and shouldering our rucksacks once more, follow the crowd out into the big station square. All these peasants who have made the huge journey from Tashkent—what is to happen to them in the big city? This new, Americanised city that is Moscow—what have they to do with it? Are they leaving the land to be absorbed into the vast machinery of its industry?

There are no droshkies or taxis in the square, and a bitter wind is blowing. We have a choice between trying to board a tram which already has human beings clinging to its sides like barnacles on a derelict ship, or else joining a taxi queue. We decide that the latter is easier. Only about half a dozen people are waiting. The man behind us grumbles because he says we could easily go by Metro. Perhaps he has a just grievance against us for occupying a place in the queue, but strength or energy or both seem to have ebbed from us, for the mere thought of shouldering our rucksacks again revolts us. . . .

When we arrive at the hotel and demand the room for which we wired *en route*, we are told that the hotel is full and that the wire has not been received. We explain that we have stayed here before, and add that we cannot believe that the hotel is full at the end of the season like this. . . . They ask—Are we Intourist? We hardly know. We were the guests of Voks to the Caucasus. Since then we have travelled on illicit roubles—

but we can hardly explain that. We were originally booked at this hotel by Intourist, whilst trying for the Turkestan permits.

We explain that we wish to stay here one or two nights only, whilst I make arrangements to fly to England, and Miss Nachshen finds a room.

"You must in that case book another week's tour."

"A tour? What on earth do we want with a tour?"

Really, these Russians are preposterous! The moment we get back to Moscow it begins, this infuriating officiousness. . . .

"We cannot book you for less than a seven-day tour."

"But we don't want to be booked—we want a room for the night, perhaps two nights——"

Useless to lose one's temper, but it would take a saint not to. If only they wouldn't talk to one in that dictatorial manner it would be easier.

"I want to fly to England tomorrow morning," I begin again, in mild, patient tones. "My friend hopes to remain in Moscow and work. It is possible that she will move into a room tomorrow."

"Show me your passports, please."

We produce them, and instantly, peremptorily, "You cannot go to England tomorrow. Your visa is expired. It is now very old. You must have a new visa before you can leave Moscow. It will take some time."

It is no use resenting the tone in which one is addressed. But it is very hard to speak mildly, reasonably, when your temper is at boiling point.

I ask curtly: "Is it necessary to renew my visa when I want to leave the country tomorrow?"

In any other country the reply would be a polite, regretful, "I am afraid so." One might grumble, but one would not be left in a state of fury. After the first irritation and disappointment one would shrug, philosophically. The stubborn reiteration which is the voice of Russian bureaucracy destroys reasonableness by its own wild unreason.

"You cannot go tomorrow."

That is all there is to it. You can scream yourself into a fit, or roar you sweetly as 'twere any nightingale, and it will make

no difference to the impassiveness of the little tin god who sits safe and smug on his bureaucratic throne.

A room is found for us, despite the original assertion that the hotel is full, and we breakfast—or try to, for it all takes an interminable time—in the vast gloomy dining-hall.

"I've got to get out of this bloody city tomorrow or I shall go mad."

I am resolved to telephone to the consul to see if anything can be done about my visa. I reflect, morosely, that the previous year when I was in Moscow I lingered on and on, unable to tear myself away, now I am as burnt up with the fever to leave it as when we were trying for permits for Turkestan. But the occasion of my first visit, I remind myself, was in the height of the theatre festival, when this hotel was like a university, full of life and movement, interesting people; this is the end of the season; 'everyone' has long ago gone home. The face of Moscow, too, has changed very much in a year. It has all of an American soullessness without the American efficiency. It is a good place in which to have a nervous breakdown from sheer exasperation and frustration.

The consul is charming, sympathetic; he will do everything in his power to get the visa renewed quickly, but today is the day of rest and he can do nothing.

"Can you rush it through the day after?"

"It doesn't rest with me. And you don't need me to tell you what Russian bureaucracy is. . . . Come and have lunch tomorrow, both of you, and tell us all about Samarkand——"

We go to the ballet, we lunch at the consulate, we give a small dinner-party. I tell everyone that I am leaving Moscow tomorrow. The consul has said that the visa is all right and that there is no reason why I should not fly tomorrow morning.

When we recover our passports that evening and examine them there is no sign of a new visa inscribed therein.

In a panic we consult with various people in the hotel, who also can find no trace of renewed visas. It doesn't matter for Donia, but my ticket is bought for the aeroplane tomorrow morning. . . .

Intourist decides that it must get in touch with the young

woman who took the passports over to the Foreign Office. There are numerous telephonings in an attempt to trace her. At about midnight, by which time I have given up all hope, the young woman comes to the hotel . . . to explain that it is all right; the aerodrome has been telephoned that there has been no time to renew the visa, but that it is all right; also the frontier has been telephoned.

I don't like it. I am not convinced that it is all right. But I am determined to get into that aeroplane tomorrow morning. As determined as I was to get to Samarkand.

We go to bed for a few hours, and get up whilst it is still dark. The streets are stirring to life in the bleak grey light. Moscow goes to bed late and gets up early. The aerodrome 'bus has only one other passenger, a huge fat male who looks like a German business-man. Trams clatter by packed with workers. I watch the drab figures hurrying along the pavements and try to visualise a life in which one gets up in the dark and leaves a squalid room and goes out to work in the red dawn. I hear the Russian engineer saying: "It's a hard life, still, for most people, but——"

Faith is the flame by which we live. I look at the dull, stolid faces, and wonder. God help those in whom the flame of faith wavers. But perhaps I am merely being morbid because of the angry-looking red dawn and the cold grey light.

At the aerodrome we wait for a little while in an outer office whilst the big fat man is in the inner sanctum with his baggage. Then I am summoned. Donia rises to accompany me. She is told that she must not do so.

"But my friend does not speak Russian. Is there anyone who speaks English?"

No. Very well then. We go in together and a bad-tempered-looking woman official begins methodically taking every single thing out of my suit-case, and commands that I do likewise with my rucksack. Not merely does she take every single thing out of the case, but unfolds every handkerchief, unrolls every stocking, takes the lid off a box of powder, removes the cork from a bottle of aspirin, turns the pages of my note-book and pores over the pages which she cannot read, and begins taking letters from their envelopes. . . .

When she gets to the letters Donia protests on my behalf: "Those are private letters."

The official ignores the protest and takes up a letter addressed to Donia's parents which I had undertaken to post in England, also a letter from the Russian engineer to a friend in England. These letters she confiscates, likewise some jewellery which I had proposed to take home as presents. It appears I should have registered the jewellery. No one had told me to do so when I purchased it, and I explain this, but it makes no difference.

I am then required to show my money. I produce fifty pounds in five-pound notes. I am asked for the receipt for money which was given me at Leningrad when I arrived two months ago. Vaguely I recall having been given a tiny slip of paper . . . which I ceased to think about almost from the time it was handed to me. In Russia one collects so many grubby little slips of paper.

Donia explains that we have been wandering about for two months and that the receipt is lost. Whereupon I am informed that the money is confiscated for six months. It is too much! How am I to get to Croydon without money? My ticket takes me only to Berlin. What am I to do when I arrive in Berlin —sleep in the streets? The male official who has joined the woman shrugs. The woman smiles, sadistically. She is the spiritual sister of those female fiends on Samarkand railway station.

We are both in a great rage, and for the last time I groan inwardly: "If only I spoke the language!"

Though I gather from the storm of furious words pouring from Donia's lips that I could hardly do better than she is doing. What would have happened had she not been there to translate, I cannot imagine. Finally, after some telephoning, the male official declares that my ticket will be extended to Croydon.

"But what about Berlin? She has to pass the night there. She cannot do it without money!"

There is more consultation and telephoning, and finally two of the five-pound notes are pushed back to me. The formalities are concluded, and I begin to repack my suit-case. The woman official looks on with her sadistic smile.

"Tell that—to give me a hand!"

Donia translates the command as a request. The woman does not budge. Donia appeals to the other official. He shrugs.

"Your friend must do it herself."

It is as well I do not speak Russian. . . .

All this takes just under an hour. Meanwhile, the fat German, and the pilot, and his assistant, are waiting outside, and the mechanics have set the propellers of the machine roaring.

The sky is still a sheet of angry flame, broken with thin strata of curled clouds betokening wind. Trouble up there, too, by the look of it. . . .

A small figure at the barrier of the flying-field waves a white handkerchief as we take off into the wind. I close my eyes on a wave of nausea as we climb up bumpily, and when I open them again all Moscow lies below in a glitter of golden domes and square piled-up boxes of buildings. Then fir-forests and swamps, endlessly, as we head towards Prussia.

A few months later Donia finds the receipt given us at Leningrad in her Russian grammar . . . and in due course I receive a draft for the money through the consulate in Moscow.

By that time I have come to the journey's end of it all in a London hospital, and though there is no pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber-door, the raven's beak is in my heart and his shadow on the floor. . . .

His the word of valediction—'*Nevermore*'.

LONDON.
Jan.–July, 1936.

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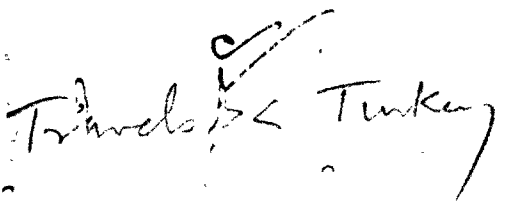
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